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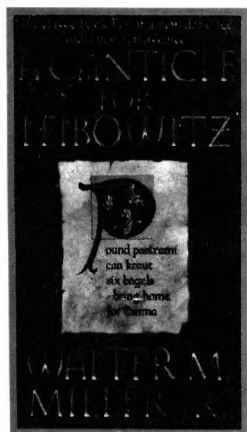
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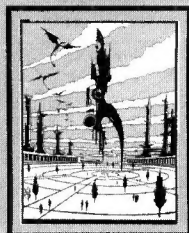
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interZone

October 1997

124

science fiction & fantasy

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Dear Editors:

I saw your piece in this month's "Interaction" (*Interzone* 123) about sf books being published as mainstream. I've read one of the unseen books you mention, Chris Wilson's *The Wurd*. Here's the brief review I wrote under the pseudonym of Bob Morrison for my review column in *Knave* magazine (long since vacated by Neil Gaiman). If you want to use it that's fine by me...

The Wurd by Chris Wilson (Flamingo, 1995, £14.99)

Set in prehistory, this hilarious and thought-provoking account of the emergence of language and its consequences for the poor saps ensnared by wurds does more for linguistics than Wittgenstein or Chomsky ever did. It's an eye-witness account no less, courtesy of a lippy cave-man named Gob who was there when the first word was spoken. Gob is with a blind woom-man and, knowing he doesn't have much longer to live, decides to pass on the history of peepil to her. Language, he tells her, is important because it enables more sophisticated things: lies, drunkenness, moruls, different ways to fuk and fight – everything that makes us what we are. The fact that the book's written in cave-man pidgin English is a plus – even to those who were not fans of Bascule in Iain M. Banks's *Feersum Endjinn*. It's a device that highlights the comic potential as well as helping to add an extra element of poignancy which emerges with Gob's tale.

By the way, I don't mind my real name being used – the pseudonym thing is ... well, I don't know why really. *The Wurd* really is an excellent book – one of the best I've come across recently, publishers' classifications notwithstanding, and one I wish I'd written.

Andy Oldfield

andy.oldfield@virgin.net

Editor: Many thanks, Andy. If anyone else can send us accounts or impressions of any of the other "unseen" sf books I listed in last issue's editorial, I'd be grateful. As regular readers will know, I've been banging the drum for sf-by-mainstream-writers since my editorial in issue 116, and it's pleasing to note that others are taking a similar interest. In the latest issue of S-F Studies (#72, July 1997, p367-368), Dale Mullen mentions two further new sf novels by mainstreamers: *Lives of the Monster Dogs* by Kirsten Bakis (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and *Wish: A Biologically Engineered Love Story* by Peter Goldsworthy ("published in Australia but apparently not yet in the US or the UK"). He praises both highly, and likens the former, which is about dogs "carved into human stature and intelligence by a mad scientist," to Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), and the latter, which is about "geneticists who raise Wish, a female gorilla, to human intelligence," to Stapledon's *Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord* (1944). So we have two more items to look out for.

+ Interaction +

Dear Editors:

It is always disappointing to encounter an unsatisfactory interview with a favourite author and I sympathize with Allan Lloyd (letter, issue 122) who did not approve of my "Portrait of Gene Wolfe" in *Interzone* 119.

There are many ways of conducting interviews and the method I chose was quite deliberate. I could have gone for the Sunday broadsheet style, where you mug up on your celebrity author, snuggle up to him/her with your tape recorder and then chat to all his ex-spouses and enemies before delivering a devastating hatchet job to the editor (describing the shifty eyes, the sweaty palms or, in the case of female prey, how much older and kind-of-wizened she looks compared to her picture). This method is probably fair enough for people whose work you despise. But, as I said at the beginning of my article, I am an out-and-out Gene Wolfe fan.

Or I could have used the standard *Interzone* model. Here you probably know the author and have read most of his/her work. You may well be a fellow writer. You sit down together over a beer and leave the recorder on. After an exchange of pleasantries you engage in a conversation about the oeuvre. Soon you get down to details: Q. "I've always interpreted Zara's cathartic experience in the swamp in Chapter 41 of *Warlock of Tharg* as a reference to your first marriage." A. "You mean the incident with the leeches? Just a bit of fun – she's fine now..." This style of interview is great if the reader is thoroughly familiar with *Warlock of Tharg*, but I have often come away from reading this kind of thing feeling that I have been blackballed from an exclusive club and still know nothing about the writer's work and whether I want to try reading any of it.

I was attempting, perhaps unsuccessfully, to portray an eminent author who has a reputation for being extraordinarily cunning, mysterious and devious and to demonstrate, partly by reference to his work, that he has a very ordinary side to him and that the ordinary part is as important to his writing as the extraordinary part. I also hoped that those unfamiliar with his books might be tempted to try them. I do not agree with Allan Lloyd that "the most important feature of Gene Wolfe's work ... takes the form of puzzles." I like the puzzles too, but find other aspects of the writing far more compelling. Who else can convey such a sense of antique evil, melancholy loss, fortitude in the face of suffering, glimpses of the abyss, and sheer sensawunda? Milton maybe, but I don't think he would have liked Benny Hill.

Elizabeth Counihan

East Grinstead, Sussex

Dear Editors:

Thank you for the marvellous interview with M. John Harrison (issue 122). It illuminated some aspects of his writing and set me right about others. I have always admired his imagination and his written style: pared down to the absolute brutal beautiful minimum. He should already be a household name in much the same way as, to paraphrase Mr Royle, Amis and McEwan have become.

One question stuck in my mind: the reason why Harrison is so under-regarded. I must lay the blame squarely at the feet of the publishers. The whole marketing strategy of Gollancz for *Signs of Life* consisted of the rep telling me: "New M. John Harrison. Wouldn't bother." There was no advertising, either in the press for the book trade, or in magazines or newspapers at large. How can the book trade have faith in a product that the publisher is not prepared to put any weight behind? And how, following on from that, is a book like *Signs of Life*, glorious as it is, going to find its way onto the shelves? Which begs the question: how does it get bought? And, how does Mr Harrison make any money? And this is true not only of Gollancz, but also of giants HarperCollins, who were responsible for sneaking *Climbers* and *The Ice Monkey* into print in paperback without telling anyone.

I can add another hurdle also: price. *Signs of Life* is £16.99. *Course of the Heart* was also £16.99. *Course of the Heart* has never reached paperback. I find the likelihood of *Signs of Life* doing so (unless your readership rises as one and purchases the whole print-run) extremely slim. Booksellers won't buy in a hardback of that price unless they know it will sell (or are certifiably insane, or know excellent alternative fiction when they see it).

I would adore it if Gollancz got off its outdated posterior and gave us M. John Harrison as a trade paperback (at £9.99) or paperback original (at £7.99). They will do this for "new" and "up-and-coming" authors like Joe Lansdale, or even such excellent writers as Neil Ferguson and Alan Moore. Why not M. John Harrison? Have some faith. Sell some books. I dare you.

I do apologize for my ranting, and thank you for your time.

David Burrows

Camberley, Surrey

Editor: are you sure there hasn't been a paperback of Harrison's *The Course of the Heart*? True, *Interzone* didn't receive one for review, but we have a feeling HarperCollins may have snuck it out in their "Flamingo" snob-back line, and of course *Flamingo* books rarely get sent to us for review because "they're not sf" (e.g. Aldiss, Ballard, Burroughs, Harrison – all that interesting stuff that's not published under H/C's *Voyager* imprint...).

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SECRETS

Ian Watson



July had been a wretched month so far. When it wasn't raining, it was drizzling. This ought to have been good news for the reservoirs, but the water companies were whining that England needed weeks of sustained downpour. Those greedy privatized utilities hadn't re-invested enough of their profits. While umbrellas were bumping into one another, water was being imported by tanker all the way from Portugal, where there were floods of the stuff. Apparently there was a genuine drought in Scandinavia, but Scandinavians probably organized their affairs more sensibly.

The persistent precipitation was not good for profits at the Fernhill Farm Craft Centre. Steve and I were selling a reasonable number of jigsaws by mail order, but we also relied on visitors. A silvery-haired old gent, who arrived in a black Mercedes on a quiet Monday morning, piqued our interest.

The gravelled car park was always at least half full, but the vehicles belonged either to our fellow craftsfolk or to God's Legion which owned Fernhill. Steve had just fetched a couple of mugs of coffee from the tea-room in the former milking parlour, back to our unit in a converted byre. Usually we saw to our own drinks, but our autojug had quit the day before, and we had forgotten to bring its twin from home. Shuttling an essential piece of domestic equipment to and fro was obviously a non-starter. We would need to buy a replacement.

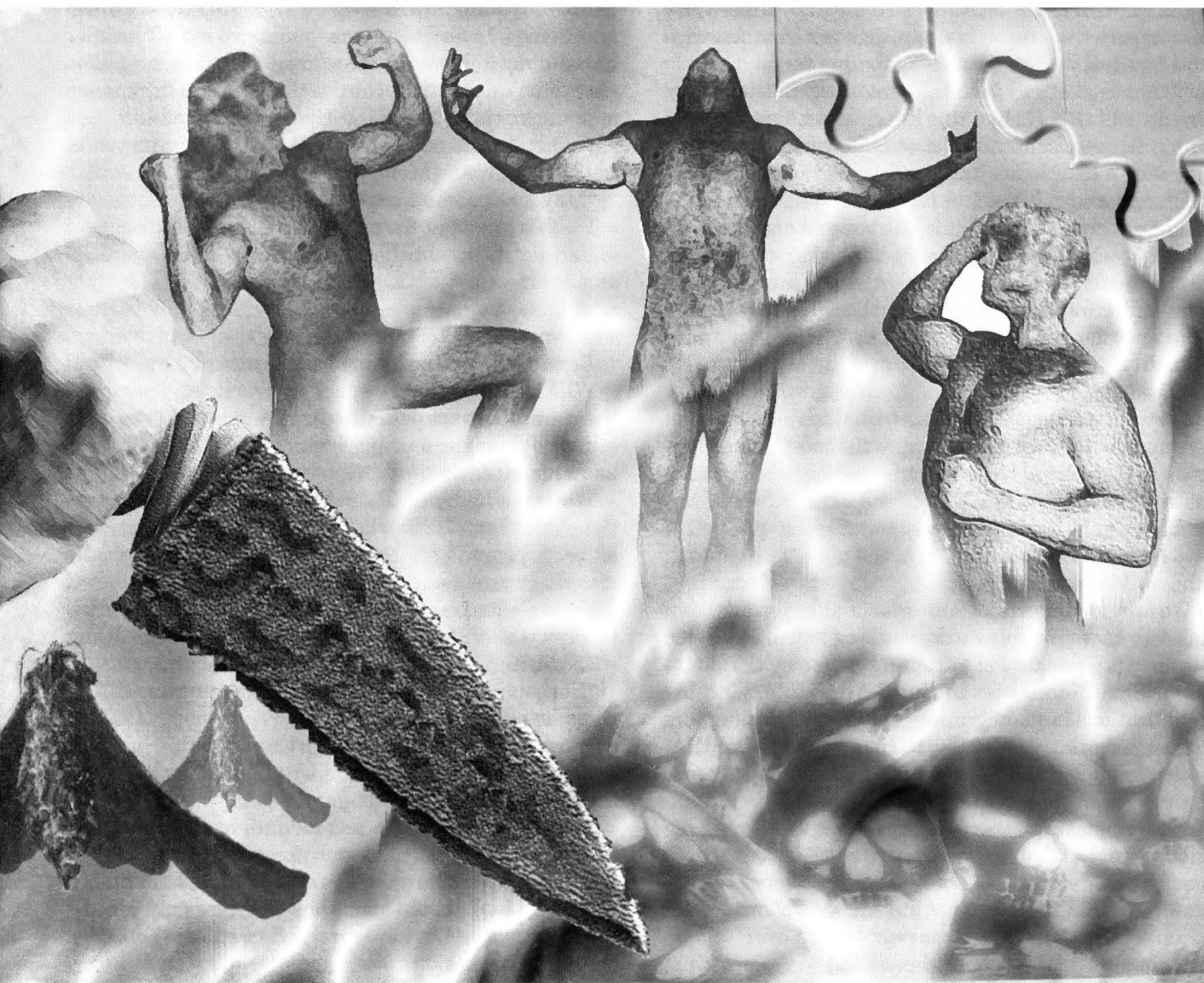
"Look," I said, "a rich customer."

The well-heeled gent might wish to have a book expensively bound in tooled leather by Nigel, next door to us. No: an umbrella occupied one of the gent's hands, and a walking stick, the other. Forget any book, unless it was pocket-sized. Maybe he was interested in commissioning a hand-engraved goblet from Charlotte, on our other side?

The man looked to be in his late 70s. Leaning on his stick, he glowered at a God's Legion mini-bus, which was painted in luridly clashing blue and green and yellow. Eye-catching, was the idea. A prominent day-glo scarlet slogan proclaimed salvation through Jesus.

As a rule God's Legion refrained from parking any of their distinctive "troop transports" at Fernhill in case the sight was off-putting to visitors who were only interested in a collector's dolls' house or a souvenir Victorian-style glass paperweight. What we would generally see here would be one or other of the Legion's more anonymous builder's vans. Big in the building trade, the Legion was. The former farmyard here at Fernhill showcased hundreds of pieces of reclaimed architecture: convoluted old chimney-pots several feet tall, marble fire-places, towering iron gateways.

"He can drive," I said hopefully, "but most of the time he's sedentary. So he's a jigsaw addict. Big tray on his rug-covered lap. His housekeeper bringing a mug of hot chocolate."



Illustrations by Dominic Harman

In addition to house repairs, God's Legion was also into health food, grown on Glory Farm ten miles away. Many of the legionnaires, male and female, lived communally in a manor house renamed Salvation Hall, and worked for bed and board and pocket money, under the eye of their leader, a schismatic Baptist minister named Hugh Ellison. Charismatic, vain and autocratic, Ellison banned the 50 residents of Salvation Hall and the similar cohorts at Glory Farm from watching any television, so I'd heard.

The aim of the Legion was to rescue young folk who had gone astray in London, runaways from broken homes or abuse. To rehabilitate those vulnerable orphans of the streets, train them, bring Christ back into their lives, and also fruitful labour. The Legion was steadily expanding its business and property interests to fund its good works. Legion workers had converted the derelict farm-house and outbuildings of Fernhill into the workshops and showrooms of the present craft centre. Legion girls ran the tea-rooms, selling glory-food. However, no obtrusive propaganda was on show, nor were any of us craftspeople interested in being born again. Rents for the units just happened to be very moderate. Maybe us craftspeople were window-dressing, proof that the Legion was no doctrinaire cult but a broad-minded, benevolent body.

The silver-haired man began to walk slowly towards the yard, around which were the majority of our work-

shops and showrooms. He paused to look into Ben and Barbara Ackroyd's ceramics studio (specialists in signs and plaques, hand-made, painted to order, world-wide mail-order service).

"He wants a nameplate for his house."

"No, Steve, he's just resting."

A ceramic nameplate featuring daffodils or bunny-rabbits might be a bit naff for our dignified gent. You might well say that what Steve and I produced at *Majig Mementoes* was naff. Yet you had to find a commercial gimmick, a vacant niche in the craft world. When we applied for the unit, the name of our enterprise had provoked suspicion from Hugh Ellison, who had vetted us personally. What was this about *magic*? Here at Fernhill we would find no New Age craftspeople peddling pagan symbolism!

Majig Mementoes is merely a catchy name, we explained. Jig, from jigsaw – plus magic moments, treasured memories, as in the song. We would turn any photograph into a special personalized jigsaw. Wedding photograph, holiday photo, baby or pet portrait, pic of your house or your garden at its best, or your classic car. The jigsaw could be a surprise present for someone. It might serve as a promotional ploy, advertising your business. Rectangle or circle or star-shape: you name it. Your initials linked together. Car-shaped, yacht-shaped, cat-shaped. If a client had no suitable photo available, I

could take excellent pictures with my digi-camera. We also imported speciality collector-jigsaws from America and Sweden, mostly for sale by mail-order.

"What kind of *specialities*," demanded Ellison, "does Sweden offer?" He had this knack of echoing the final sound in each sentence – a trick to avoid the usual "ums" or "ers." No hesitations figured in his speech.

Craggy and patriarchal he looked – someone who would roll up his sleeves (after first removing the well-tailored jacket and the chunky cufflinks) and plunge rescued souls into a tub of water. Alas, he was losing his hair, and wore what remained rather absurdly long in the camouflage style of a vain bloke who cannot admit to reality.

"SwedenN –?"

"Nothing naughty," Steve hastened to reassure him. "A company in Helsingborg makes the most difficult jigsaws in the world. 40,000 unique pieces to the square metre. That's over 25 pieces to the square inch."

"That ought to keep Swedes out of mischief." As if Swedes were forever romping in the nude, feeding each other wild strawberries.

We would undertake any reasonable jigsaw commission. Steve, with his woodworking skills, and some accountancy courtesy of a training course by the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas. Me, with my qualifications in photography and graphic design, and some marketing know-how, thanks again to CoSIRA, which had oiled the wheels for us to take out a bank loan for working capital.

Ellison's next question was, "Is a unit at Fernhill *big* enough for you to manufacture jigsaws?" Now he had his financial hat on. (Let not a mischievous gust of wind blow into the little office behind the tea-rooms, where he interviewed us, and expose his comb-over!) Steve explained how the colour separation, litho-printing, spray-mounting, and lamination would be carried out by a printing firm in Blanchester, our county town nearby, which would also produce the cardboard boxes. Our main expense had been the computer and software for editing and tweaking electronic pictures, and the scanner for digitizing customers' own photos.

The silver-haired gent had moved on, to pause outside Donald and Daisy Dale's *Chess Yes!* (Hand-made, hand-painted sets, characters out of Arthurian Legend to *Star Trek*; unusual commissions welcomed.) Still, the brolly did not go down – not until the old man reached our own unit, and proceeded to step inside. We were in luck. Calling out a cheery greeting, we busied ourselves so he would feel at ease while he looked around, though we did sneak glances.

A framed oval jigsaw held him spellbound. Two lovely twin sisters, early teenage, with blond pigtails, were leaning laughing against the basin of the Fountain of Trevi in Rome. Both girls wore polka-dot frocks, one of yellow spots on red, the other of red spots on yellow. Photo by proud Daddy, who lived in our own village of Preston Priors and who ran a Jaguar dealership in Blanchester. Daddy had sent out our jigsaws of his girls as Christmas presents to relatives at home and abroad. He had been only too happy to let us keep one on permanent show at Fernhill. Whether all the recipients would be enchanted by the proud gift ("See what lovely children I have!") was, perhaps, another matter.

In his younger years our visitor must have been handsome in a Germanic way – him driving a Mercedes directed my mind along these lines. Lofty brow, aquiline nose, blue eyes, jutting chin, and no doubt a flaxen mop of hair in times gone by. His broad shoulders had shrunk in. He no longer stood so straight and tall in his posh suit, as once he must.

"May I ask some questions?"

I would have put his accent as educated Tyneside, if it had not been subtly foreign. Steve and I were all attention.

That van: did all of us here belong to God's Legion?

Definitely not. I explained the situation.

Who had paid for the special advertising feature in the county newspaper on Saturday, profiling the craft centre? It was the four-page spread which had brought us to his attention.

Why, that had been Hugh Ellison's notion to promote the place. God's Legion bore half the cost. Collectively, us craftspeople paid the rest. Nowhere in the profile was there any mention of glory or redemption.

He consulted our brochure. "You are Chrissy Clarke. Chrissy is short for Christine. I suppose you sympathize with the aims of these evangelists."

"Not especially! It's only a business arrangement. The rents are cheap."

Our visitor probed our background a bit more, which I thought was rather impertinent, but he *was* a potential client.

Steve and I had met as students at art college in Loughborough. Both of us were keen on jigsaw puzzles. Photography and graphics; woodworking; blah blah. I did not go into details about how we were only renting our cottage, or how on earth we would ever find a chance to have kids.

Changing tack abruptly: how tiny could the pieces of a jigsaw be made? As soon as I mentioned that company in Sweden: could we show him an example of their products right now?

Of course we could.

The miniature intricacy delighted him. "This is very fortunate. Majig, I do like that name."

Steve chuckled. "God's Legion were a bit suspicious of it at first."

Those blue eyes twinkled. "I can guess why."

"We had thought about calling ourselves *Jiggery-Pokery*."

"What does that mean? I do not know the words."

"It means something crafty," I intervened. "It's from a Scots word for trick, which probably comes from the French for game. But really, it suggests deceitfulness."

"You explain well to a foreigner."

"That's because I had a German boyfriend for a little while before I met Steve." Heinz had been studying graphics at Loughborough. I had thought he was sweet.

"A German boyfriend? That's good."

"Because *you* are a German?" My tone was a touch tart.

"Because it broadens the mind. In fact, Miss Clarke, I am Norwegian. My name is Knut Alver, and I have a proposal..."

What a proposal it was, certainly as regards the fee he

offered, and the fringe benefits – a quick trip to Norway at his expense, returning via Sweden and Copenhagen.

To give Mr Alver his due, he made the commission sound as normal as he could. He felt very nostalgic, so he explained, for the land of his birth. Unfortunately, he was terrified of air travel. Boat trips made him seasick. A car journey to Norway would be too gruelling at his age, even if a chauffeur was at the wheel.

In Oslo, he went on, there is a sculpture park – the creation of a certain Gustav Vigeland. This park and its statues epitomize the spirit of Norway. Mr Alver wanted majig mementoes of the place, to assemble at his leisure. By so doing, he would be putting his own life in order metaphorically, before the grim reaper came for him.

He wished us to go to Oslo and take pictures of various sculptures in the park by moonlight. We should carry our film to that Swedish firm, for them to produce four custom-made jigsaws with as many thousands of pieces as they could pack into each. He would pay the Swedes in advance on our behalf. Mr Alver tapped the Swedish box we had shown him.

“Keep Publishing: that is what the name of the company means.”

Steve grinned. *“Persistent people, eh?”*

Mr Alver regarded him oddly, then chuckled.

What’s more, Alver went on, we must *drive* with our film the 300 or so miles from Oslo to Helsingborg in Sweden in a hire-car, for which he would pay.

“It is good to keep in touch with the ground. Even railway trains are somewhat detached from the landscape. I have never liked trains –”

There seemed to be few forms of transport of which he did approve! Ours not to reason why. A drive through Sweden could be lovely and fascinating. I did correct him on one point.

“No films are involved, Mr Alver. I use a digital still camera. The images store electronically on a pop-out cartridge.”

“Oh... These pictures must be taken late at night, by moonlight. Is it technically possible with such a camera – as regards exposure?”

Simpler and faster. Camera on a tripod. A minute or so by moonlight should be fine. Bright and early next morning, we would return to take the same pictures by daylight. The Swedish company’s computer would tweak the digi-pictures to enhance and smooth out grain and add in extra detail.

“This is excellent – better than I hoped.” Then Mr Alver proceeded to broach the slightly bizarre aspect of the commission.

“That park is most magical by moonlight. It is open all round the clock, and perfectly safe for a stroll at any hour –”

One good reason for taking the pictures at midnight was that we should have the place pretty much to ourselves. During daylight hours tourists, particularly Japanese, infested the Vigeland Park, so he had heard.

“All of the granite sculptures in the park are nude figures – of men and women, young and middle-aged and old, and of boys and girls and babies. The park is a celebration of the cycle of life –”

Here came the delicate part of the commission. The Norwegian gent insisted that Steve and I in turn must

press our own naked flesh against the sculptures he specified, embracing those granite nudes. Two photos of Steve doing so; two photos of myself. Resulting in four jigsaws. Circular ones, each half a metre across. In black and white.

Steve is skinny. Rabbit-skinny, is the way he refers to it. Imagine a rabbit dangling, skinned, in a butcher’s shop. He’s red-headed – curly-haired – and covered in freckles. I’m plumper. Frankly I’m a little plumper than I ought to be, though my breasts are petite. Good child-bearing hips, and never mind about the milk-supply. Usually I wear my long dark hair tied up. Neither of us were pin-ups, but of course that is true of most people.

“I require nothing frontal. I am an old man. Nudity is not titillating to most Norwegians. This is a... symbolic thing. You will understand when you see the sculptures. Adopt whatever pose is most comfortable.”

I nodded reassuringly at Steve. Free trip to Scandinavia. Nice fat fee for a little work.

“And there’ll be nobody in the park but us?” Steve asked.

“There will be a few people, but it is a big place. I want

you to take the photographs on the central elevated platform. From there you can see all around. The sculptures provide cover –”

For our exposure, ho.

“I imagine you will wear clothing which you can remove quickly –”

Quite, a dress without knickers underneath. I could forgo a bra. Steve should wear underpants in case he zipped himself.

After the jigsaws were produced in Helsingborg, we should take the ferry across to Denmark and fly back with the four boxes of jumbled pieces from Copenhagen, where we would have left our rent-a-car. On our return, we would phone Mr Alver so that he could come to Fernhill to collect the goods. He would not confide his address to us because, frankly, he was something of a recluse, who feared being burgled now that he was frail. This was another quirk I could easily live with. He would book our flights and a hotel room in Oslo near the park, and a hotel in Helsingborg. Tickets and such would arrive in the post. Half of our fee he would pay in advance right now, and in cash.

And so it was agreed. And shaken upon. Mr Alver insisted on clasping my hand, and Steve’s too. He hung on to us for about five times longer than your average handshake. Maybe this was a Norwegian expression of sincerity.

At the top of the 50-mile-long fjord, the Scandinavian Airline Service jet commenced its turn towards the airport. What a compact city Oslo seemed, hemmed in by hills. A wilderness of hills rolled far into the distance. The same landscape stretched for a distance equal to about half the length of Europe, with only a few million Norwegians to stipple the empty spaces.

The plane banked westward, past the stocky twin-towered city hall of red brick on the waterfront. Probably we overflew the sculpture park, but without spotting it.

A taxi took us from the airport to a street of shops

and businesses, called Bogstadveien, and decanted us at a certain Comfort Hotel. This sounded suspiciously like a sex establishment, but proved to be patronised by Norwegian families on holiday. Our room was tastefully mock art nouveau, recently revamped. One oddity was that each landing of the Comfort Hotel boasted a communal trouser press. During our stay I never saw any of these presses in use. What if, overnight, someone stole a guest's pants? Maybe no one would dream of such a prank in Norway.

People might be too busy guarding their trouser pockets! – in view of the sky-high price of a beer in the hotel bar, and anywhere else – not to mention the cost of meals, clothes, books, and all else. Norway was a seriously costly country.

We had arrived around six in the evening. A glance at the bar and restaurant tariff sent us out along the street, past shops and a few other hotels and bars, in search of somewhere more reasonable – until we wised up and returned. Beer at six pounds a glass was the norm. We would eat and drink in the hotel, and not feel guilty that we were exploiting Mr Alver.

We booked a coach tour of Oslo for next day, picking up from our hotel early on. National Gallery (for a gape at *The Scream*), Viking longships, *Kon-Tiki* et cetera, ending up at the Vigeland Park. Clear sky permitting, we could return to the park late the same night simply by walking from Bogstadveien, no great distance, according to the hotel receptionist.

Our fellow sightseers proved to be a mixed bag of Americans and Europeans. Japanese tourists rated entire coaches to themselves. The day was balmy, clouds few and fluffy in a blue sky. Those Viking boats in the museum at Bygdy – we were getting our bearings – were huger than I had expected. Likewise, the crowds of visitors. This was also true at the Vigeland Park, at least by day.

“God, it’s so Teutonic –”

Steve was right.

A monumental sevenfold row of wrought-iron gates topped by huge square lamps led to a grassy avenue lined with maple trees. This sward led to the powerful central axis of the park, which was crisscrossed by geometrical paths. We crossed a long bridge, many pale grey granite physiques young and old upon its parapets. A few figures were grappling with a dragon of mortality, which eventually sapped its victim. (Likewise, at the gates, lizards had been gripping young children.)

From the bridge, upward and upward the park rose, stage by stage, flight of steps by flight of steps, towards a distant monolith. The impression was of a hugely elongated, flattened ziggurat, a Nordic Aztec temple.

A mosaic labyrinth enclosed a great fountain. Around the fountain’s rim, muscular bodies were entwined with sculpted trees resembling giant stone broccoli, infants dangled from the branches. Over-sized nude men bore the weight of the massive basin. Struggle. Growth. Sexuality. Death.

Ascending past stone bodies (and many camera-toting Japanese), we came to an oval plateau. So many tourists milled about here that we might have been negotiating an open-air dance floor.

On rising plinths a zodiac of hulking figures, young

and old, embraced and wrestled and clung to one another. It was four of those groups to which Steve and I must attach ourselves that night, when the place was quiet. Those plinths and their burdens partitioned circular stairs leading to the summit, where a monolith soared 30 or 40 feet high.

So phallic, that fountaining column of bodies! The bodies at the base looked like corpses. Higher up, frozen movement began – a yearning ascendance skyward. The tip was a swarm of small children suggestive of cherubs or magnified sperms.

“It’s like some sort of nature-worshipping Nuremberg rally! The Nazis must have loved this place when they were here.”

Quite, Steve. The park was still being finished during the Second World War, when Norway was occupied – so the tour guide on the coach had explained.

My idea of the history of Norway consisted of the Vikings followed after a giant void by Ibsen, then by Resistance heroes being parachuted into forests to sabotage Nazi U-boat bases and heavy water factories. (Not everyone was a Resistance hero – a certain Mr Quisling, whose name became a by-word for treachery, had headed a puppet government of collaborators.) Stonecarvers did not complete work on the monolith in the park until 1943. I imagined black-clad SS officers strolling by, blond frauleins on their arms, psyching themselves up to breed more of the master race to replace losses at Stalingrad.

Those various lizards and dragons might be a morbid echo of the way Norwegian life was being strangled by tyranny, as well as a perennial image of the way death finally defeats life – but not before new children are spawned.

“It isn’t my cup of tea, either,” I admitted. “It’s all so heavy. I’ll feel like a human slug pressing myself up against the figures...” Tonight, tonight. If the sky stayed clear. Clouds were in short supply over Scandinavia.

“You’ll look great.”

Would Mr Alver think so too? And likewise of Steve, draped against granite? Such puny physiques, ours, compared with the adamant anatomy on show. Evidently this did not matter, compared with the symbolism. When we had checked the positions of the groups we were supposed to interact with – to the north, south, east, and west – we retraced our steps, a thousand of them, so it seemed, before we regained the vast wrought-iron gateway. We said goodbye to the coach courier and walked back to the hotel to be sure of the distance. The journey only took 15 minutes.

Viewed from the monolith plateau by the light of the moon, this park could have been designed to summon aliens from the sky, to be their landing site.

Or to summon *something*, at any rate.

Pompeii-like, a race of giants was petrified in the midst of life’s yearnings and raptures and struggle, or melancholy acceptance.

Far away down below a tall beaming granite mother ran, child in her outstretched arms, her long stone hair blown back. We had passed her earlier; and also a grinning father hoisting a lad up by the wrists high above his own head. By contrast, up top all adults were kneeling or bending or sitting bunched up, or they only came

into existence at the knee. An elderly seated couple consoled each other. A kneeling wrestler hurled a woman over his shoulder. Only children stood upright.

The exaggeration of the figures – the massive, sleek stylization – banished any notion that these bodies might momentarily come to life. Yet to run my hand over the smooth granite surfaces was to discover, by touch alone, sinews and muscles which had been invisible even in bright daylight. Only physical contact revealed the hidden dimension.

The moon was full. Clouds were few. Some people were loitering on the bridge of statues, but that was far away. With a wax crayon I marked the position of the tripod's legs for reference in the morning. Steve stripped and leaned against that stone man hurling a woman away from him. He held still, skinned rabbit against moonlit granite.

We had finished with three of the groups. Hair hanging loose, I was about to shuck off my dress and sandals and mount a plinth to join a tight cluster of chunky stone girls. Bums outward, pigtailed heads bowed, these recent graduates from childhood appeared to be absorbed in comparing their presumably burgeoning genitals. What was within their charmed circle was solid rock, of course.

Which was when The Drunk arrived.

His short fair hair was tousled, his face, even by moonlight, weatherbeaten. Checked shirt, jeans, workman's boots. God knows if he had been spying, blending in ghostlike behind other sculptures. He addressed us in English. We were from Britain? Photographers? Midnight is the best time of day for photographs here! Himself, he comes to this place whenever he is in Oslo when the moon is full.

Although his voice was slurred, vocabulary and grammar were commendable for a drunk – and a feather in the cap of the local educational system. With the tipsy care of someone treading a line between obstacles, he chose his words.

"Like a fish on a hook I come here. Like a whale being winched."

"Do you work on a whale-ship?"

The drunk shook his head.

"You're a trawlerman?"

No, his job is to drive a giant bulldozer. Right now, he is employed in the construction of Oslo's new international airport, 40 kilometres away from the city in empty countryside. Do we know about it? Fornebu Airport (where we had landed) is to shut. Too many flights over the city. Hide the airport where nobody lives. Previously he worked building dams. Norway needs many new dams because of climate change, did we follow him?

Tugging a wallet from his back pocket, the man fumbled out a laminated card illustrated with his photo. This, we must inspect by the light of the moon.

"My permit to drive heavy engineering vehicles. Carl Olsson: my name. Actually it is not my name. I was adopted, do you understand?"

"Adopted, yes."

"I would like to buy you a drink. Good open-air restaurant over there. Great view. But it is closed."

Of course a café would be closed at half-past-midnight.



The construction site, up-country, is dry in the alcohol sense. Nothing to do there at night but watch television in huts. Monotonous! However, he's well paid, so he can afford a binge in town. What else to do with his money?

We agreed about the hideous cost of alcohol.

Olsson showed his teeth, grinning. "If Norwegians drink, they knife each other – personally I do not." He was a well-controlled drunk. "People believe this will happen. So it is illegal to carry even a little penknife. In the village where I was raised, dancing is banned. The people think it is the devil's doing, dancing. That is near Bergen."

"Do you go home much?" *Why don't you go back home right now?*

"Nothing for me there. I come here. When I am drunk, it feels better. Tomorrow afternoon I catch the bus back to the new airport. By then I will be sober."

To come to this park, he needed to dull his senses? Mr Olsson seemed to have a screw loose.

"Please, will you take my photograph beside these stone girls and send it to me?"

I agreed – provided that he would go away afterwards.

"I don't mean to be rude but we have a job to do here. We can't do it if someone's watching."

Norwegians might not care a fig-leaf about nudity – according to Mr Alver – but Carl Olsson was more muscular than Steve. I worried about arousing the man.

"Yes, you want to be alone. I respect that." Burrowing in a pocket, he found crumpled paper and a ball-point pen. Resting paper on plinth, he printed. "This is the address of the construction site –"

Steve stuffed the paper into his jeans. Mounting the plinth, Olsson draped an arm around the shoulders of those clustering closeted girls. My camera was already in position. The Drunk held still with total concentration until I told him, "It's done."

He jumped down, but then he lingered by the granite group, leering at us.

"There is somewhere deeper than this, somewhere no tourists ever see, hidden away in darkness where no daylight reaches. It is the *other side* of this park. I do not mean where that café is – I mean the under-side, the black side. Vigeland had a younger brother, you see. The younger brother built a private death-house for himself. It is in the hills where the rich people live, the Slemdal district. If you tell me your hotel and we go in a taxi I will show it to you."

Thanks but no thanks. "You have your bus to catch tomorrow," I reminded him.

"Will you be sure to send me the photograph?"

"Yes, yes." *Just go.*

Out came that wallet again. "I pay you for the printing and postage."

"No, no, this is a gift. Be happy, Mr Olsson. Goodbye, Mr Olsson."

Blessedly he did depart. Intent upon walking straight, he did not look back. By now the time was creeping towards one o'clock. I stripped. Steve operated the digi-cam.

On our way back to the hotel, we kept an eye out for Olsson. No sign of him. We set our travel alarm clock

and caught some sleep before our return to the park at dawn. Then we went back to bed until lunchtime.

Steve made arrangements for an Avis car to be delivered bright and early next day, to be left in Helsingborg in Sweden for a surcharge. This done, we caught a tram downtown to spend the afternoon roaming and goggling at prices.

A Serb (or so he said) accosted us. Fanning out photos of cute naked black children and mud huts, he solicited money to fund him to join an aid project in Mozambique.

A lone Scottish piper in full tartan was playing a wailing lament, his woollen bonnet on the pavement for kroner. I'm sure he was the same fellow we had seen in the market square in Blanchester just before Christmas.

Oops, and further along Karl Johan Street where Munch and Ibsen used to stroll, were Bolivians in ponchos and bowler hats playing their wooden pipes, with the begging bowler set out.

When we finally reached Helsingborg after traversing much lush farming landscape, the town proved to be a nondescript one of medium size which seemed to owe its existence mainly to its harbour with ferry terminal leading over the water to fabled Elsinore; but the hotel where Mr Alver had reserved a room for us was rather splendid. The Grand boasted special rose-coloured rooms for women guests, though since I was with Steve I did not qualify for the rose-carpet treatment, nor would I have wished to.

Mr Alver had also recommended that we treat our contact at the Swedish company to a slap-up lunch in the hotel restaurant, to grease the wheels. Next noon, we hosted Per Larsen. Slim and blond, Larsen wore a shiny dark blue suit which had seen long service – leather patches protected the elbows. The Swede seemed a bit snooty about our mission, though this had nothing to do with the fact that nude photos of our backsides were involved.

"I suppose," he said presently, "this whim is not exorbitant by the standards of jet-set people who squander thousands of dollars on a party dress..." He raised his glass of wine. "Who am I to complain?"

Fairly soon I gathered that people in this part of Sweden were thrifty to the point of meanness. Larsen probably had accepted our invitation to lunch so as to save on sandwiches. This gave a new meaning to eating wild strawberries – food for free.

Steve teased him. "You might say that all jigsaw puzzles are frivolous."

Larsen would not countenance this. "Oh no! You must realize that poverty forced many people from this area to emigrate to America. Those who remained were ingenious in setting up small industries. Speciality jigsaws are a part of this."

So jigsaws were virtuous. It turned out that this region of Sweden also boasted the highest concentration of splendid manor houses and castles. I guess this figured. Rich nobles, poor peasants.

"Mr Alver must have no family," mused Larsen, "to wish to spend his last days assembling these jigsaws. He will be assembling images of you as well. Seeing your bodies take shape slowly."

"Our backs are turned. We are merely symbolic."

"Your backs are turned, Miss Clarke. You hand him those jigsaws, then you have nothing more to do with him." Hard to tell whether this was advice, or a statement of fact.

Previously we had planned on taking a taxi to the company premises. In the thrifty circumstances the three of us caught a bus – to a building near a public park which housed all that remained of Helsingborg Castle, namely the *Keep*. At last the penny dropped. *Keep Publishing*. Resolute persistence had nothing to do with it. Mr Alver must have been amused by our naïve assumption.

Larsen screened our digi-cartridge pictures. We had a technical pow-wow. Circular jigsaws, yes. Half a metre across.

Since the photo of our drunken acquaintance embracing those granite girls was also on the cartridge, we asked Larsen to make a couple of ordinary prints of it. Whether we would actually mail one to Carl Olsson remained a moot point.

We spent three days in Helsingborg, and visited that *Keep* a couple of times. A fairly impressive relic, its top gave a scenic view over the sound busy with shipping. Meanwhile the namesake company was producing those four *keepsakes* for Mr Alver, those majig mementoes.

When Mr Alver came to Fernhill to finalize the business he seemed entirely satisfied, even though he had no immediate proof of the quality of the work. This was because he had insisted that there should be no illustrations on the box lids. Steve carried four blank boxes to the black Merc, and our benefactor departed, to begin the painstaking task of assembling those jigsaws without any guide other than his own memories of the Vigeland Park from goodness knows how long ago. We popped the photo of Olsson into an envelope, but did not attach any sticker giving our address – behaving rather like Mr Alver, come to think of it. After our brief flurry of foreign travel normal life resumed.

It was not until early the following summer that the bad dreams began.

At first, the details of what we dreamt eluded us like some monster disappearing underwater, though we both felt we were being involved in some terrible activity, evil and powerful. At school I once knew a girl called Donna who saw a therapist because she plagued by "night terrors." Poor Donna would awake from deeply scary dreams in a state of sheer panic. Similar misbehaviour of the mind could not suddenly be afflicting both Steve and me. Becoming a bit hollow-eyed, we visited Doctor Ross, our GP, who deduced that we were stressed out by worries about our business, bank loan, et cetera. Ross prescribed sleeping pills. We only took those pills once – and found ourselves locked into a nightmare, from which we could not escape for ages.

My nightmare came in swirling fragments, as if I had acquired the kaleidoscopic eye of an insect, or was watching a jumble of jigsaw pieces undergoing assembly. If the jigsaw succeeded in assembling itself, so much the worse for me! All the pieces were aspects of the Vigeland Park by night – and by flaming torchlight.

Glimpses of stone figures, of geometrical patterns, of uniforms and fanatical faces. And of a naked woman – of flesh, not granite. Curly flaxen hair and full thighs – she was nude in spite of a dusting of snow on the paving stones. A long knife caught the light. Something vile was about to happen. The monolith of sculpted bodies reared high, towards a full moon.

These images seemed scattered across the inside of a balloon, constantly shifting around upon the inner surface. My dream consciousness was within the balloon, at the empty centre. Outside of the balloon, birds were diving, their beaks like spear-heads. Whenever they neared the balloon they veered away as if space itself twisted to repel them.

And then I was outside the balloon. The images within beat against their confines, hideously patterned moths trying to burst free. The balloon's transparent skin imprisoned them, for the moment. No birds were attacking now – the birds had become those moths, inside. Hawk Moths, Death's Head Moths.

Pressure was mounting inside the balloon. The tip of the monolith, its glans knobbed with naked young bodies like some droll condom designed to arouse, was pressing up against the outer skin. If the skin ruptured, the glans would spout blood and sperms and moths in an orgasm of evil vitality.

Steve and I had woken together to a dawn chorus. Early light seeped through our curtains. Steve floundered to the window to expose the world, and us. Quickly he took refuge in bed again. He held me. Five a.m., by the alarm clock.

"It's the park, isn't it? Something happening there. Something that happened once. It's building up again, Chrissy, because Alver is putting the pieces together – the pieces of the jigsaws!"

"We're part of it," I whispered, "because he touched us, and we pressed our own flesh against the sculptures –"

By stopping us from waking prematurely, Dr Ross's pills had forced us to register the dream in more detail, and remember it. We would hardly wish for a repetition of such clarity – confused though it was. We would hardly wish to stay trapped so long inside that place, that mental space! The alternative might be indefinable night terror, and the sense that something was gathering strength.

We lay there trying to define what might have happened in the sculpture park. The death's head moths inside that balloon-like sheath, the birds attacking it in vain... The uniforms, the flaring torches, the nude woman, the knife... Nazis in Norway, no doubt of it. These images were emerging as if the photographs we had taken, to be divided into thousands of pieces, had captured much more than merely the surface of things.

If something atrocious happened in that park during the Second World War, why would Knut Alver be trying to conjure it up again so many years later? He had talked about putting his own life in order before the grim reaper came. Alver must be trying to atone for something hideous in which he had been involved, in Norway, when his country was occupied. He could not, he dared not, revisit his homeland. By some mental contagion, we were sensing his inner torments as he strove to confront and exorcise those. He had set himself a penance: to devote his remaining time on Earth

to assembling images of the place where a great sin had been committed. When the pictures were complete, he could die at peace, with a sense of closure and absolution – liberated just as his motherland had once been set free. The Spirit of Norway would accept him back into its bosom.

When Steve dialled Alver's number, shortly after eight o'clock, all he got was a continuous tone. The number had been disconnected. Directory Enquiries told Steve that nobody by the name of Alver was listed anywhere in the whole county.

"He must live somewhere in this county or he wouldn't have seen the newspaper –!"

Alver had paid us in cash – tidy sums on both occasions, tempting us not to enter them in our accounts, a temptation to which we had yielded, as most people probably might. But the hotel bills – those had gone on to Alver's American Express Gold Card account. The hotels must have kept details... and *Keep Publishing*, as well.

From Fernhill later that morning I phoned Per Larsen in Helsingborg and told him that we had lost some of our records. When I called back in the afternoon: name on credit card: Knut Alver, card number blah blah – which I carefully copied down. After I had thanked the Swede, I phoned American Express in Brighton.

"I have to reach Mr Alver," I begged. "There has been a death."

This made no difference to customer confidentiality. "At least tell me, is the card still being used?"

My informant dithered, then conceded that the account had been cancelled the previous November.

"I don't think Alver was his real name," was Steve's opinion.

I imagined the phone books of the whole county in a pile – eight, ten of them? How many Norwegian-sounding names might we find listed?

"He may not use a Norwegian name, Chrissy. Not if he was a war criminal."

"Why is he living in England rather than Paraguay or somewhere?"

"Maybe he did hide in South America originally, Chrissy. But Paraguay isn't very close to Norway. It's been a long time. More than 50 years –"

A while ago I had seen a piece in the Sunday *Observer* on the subject of elderly Ukrainians and Hungarians living in Britain, who might once have been members of SS units involved in exterminations. Living here undisturbed for the past half century! Had any Norwegians volunteered for the SS?

Would the police be any help? We only had dreams as evidence. We might be wrong. What had prompted the *Observer* story, I recalled, had been the *failure* of a prosecution of an 80-year-old Ukrainian – because watertight proof was lacking. After half a century witnesses' memories were unreliable. We did not even know our suspect's real name.

"Perhaps we ought to ask Hugh Ellison for a spot of assistance."

"You can't serious, Steve. He would only want to pray with us. Accept Jesus into your heart as your protector."

"I was thinking more along the lines of God's Legion buzzing around the county doing all those building jobs.

Seeing all sorts of places. One of the Legion could have heard some gossip somewhere. Rich Norwegian recluse in the Old Rectory at Sod-Knows-Where, keeps to himself, he do."

This was grasping at straws. We may as well turn to our parents, or to book-binding Nigel. Such moments brought home to me how Steve and I did not actually have many close friends. Acquaintances, yes. Pals in whom we could confide: not really. Steve and I were each other's bosom friends, self-sufficient. Maybe this had something to do with our devotion to jigsaw puzzles rather than to, say, team sports. (Not that we did many jigsaws for fun these days!) At college we had courted by slotting pieces together over a can or two of beer, until we too slid together as a perfect match. If only we had time and money for a child, she or he would be our friend too. We would be a trio.

What was Alver's game? Penance and self-forgiveness, or something sick and sinister?

"Do you think Alver has any idea we might be affected like this?"

"Covered his tracks, didn't he?" said Steve.

Bright breezy July day. Last week, there had been half a hurricane. A coach crowded with schoolkids lumbered into the car park. An educational outing: maximum nuisance, minimum gain – unless Tracey or Kevin went home and badgered their parents for a present of a very special jigsaw. I would need to act jolly.

The knife slashed my throat. Dream-pain was distant and blunted. I felt what a beast must feel in the slaughterhouse, restrained and stunned but still aware.

My lifeblood clogged my windpipe. Strong, gloved hands were dragging me upright, a dying animal, legs spasming uselessly, around the moonlit torchlit monolith, thrusting my nakedness against hard granite figures so that my blood smeared the stone. Deep voices were chanting solemnly. Blut. Stein. Macht. Schild. Schutz. Odin. I had no voice. I was choking, drowning in my own blood.

Then my throat cleared and I screamed.

Of late, we had been leaving the curtains open while we slept.

I clutched Steve. "Do you think anybody heard?"

"What the hell does that matter?"

"The neighbours might think you're murdering me or hurting me. Did you dream?"

"Nothing – I don't think so. I don't remember. Did you take a sleeping pill without telling me?"

"No –" Words still echoed in my head.

"Blut's blood," Steve said. "*Stein* is what you drink out of in beer halls. It said *Macht* over the gate of Auschwitz."

"They weren't drinking my blood – they were spilling it on the paving, rubbing it onto the sculptures we took pictures of."

"Odin's a Norse god –"

"I know that. Those Nazis, they must have been sacrificing to Odin there in the Vigeland Park. They cut that woman's throat to mark the place with her blood. It was some sort of Nazi pagan rite – Alver must have taken part. There is someone we can ask about this, Steve! Olsson! Carl Olsson."

"The drunk?"

"Haunting that park when the moon's full. Obsessed with it. What did he say about an *other side* to the park? A black side. He wanted to take us somewhere, to show us... a death-house, he said. We sent him that photo. Him hugging the same granite girls the Nazis rubbed blood on. If fondling the sculpture made us dream, maybe it affected him too?"

"Olsson never took his clothes off."

"He can find out something for us – he's a Norwegian."

"A bulldozer driver, a part-time drunk."

"He was lonely. This'll give him a goal. We must do something, Steve!"

I decided that sending a letter to the new airport site was too slow. We had the name of the civil engineering company. The international operator came up with the phone number and connected me to the company's office in Oslo. Bless foreigners for learning English so fluently. It's an emergency, I said. I must get in touch with an employee of yours.

I held, while a tape played Grieg at me. A brisk-sounding woman came on the line, and I must repeat my rigmarole, and hold again. Money ticking away.

"Miz Clarke, are you there?"

Yes, yes, all ears.

"I am sorry for the delay. Mr Carl Olsson is no longer employed by us –"

I was calling all the way from England. Carl Olsson was our friend. This was a matter of life and death.

Unfortunately, Mr Olsson was released from his contract the previous month because of a problem. Yes, Miz Clarke, you are right: a problem connected with alcohol. The company did not know where he had gone, though his address on record was a village near Bergen. She spelled the address for me, complete with slash through the letter "o". I cradled the phone.

"That's the village he never goes back to," Steve said.

"He was proud of his license. He would only have got drunk on the job if dreams had been bothering him."

"That's a touching faith you have in him. Now he'll be working on dams again – in the middle of nowhere."

"He can't be, Steve! He won't have a clean reference. They may have endorsed his license. I don't know what their system is. He might only get another job after he attends a government alco clinic."

"Nothing stops him getting a labouring job. Shelf-packing in a supermarket. Sign on a boat as a deck-hand, sail to Australia."

"Don't try to steer me away from this, Steve! It was my throat they cut. We can't put up with this. He'll be in Oslo, Olsson will. He'll be getting drunk and going to the park at night, especially if the moon's full."

Oslo: back to that hotel on Bogstadveien? Paying our own fares, paying our own hotel bills, beer at six pounds

a glass, lunch at 15 quid a head, for a week, two weeks? We would use up all the profit we had made from Alver, aside from the fact that we had spent it months ago.

"We needn't both go, Steve."

"Don't be absurd."

Soon we were close to a quarrel.

Steve was my friend, my lover, my partner. I wanted him to father my child – she would be a daughter, of course – whenever we could afford this. Now he was balking, rejecting my intuition, scared of the cost when we were already paying a hateful price. Despite him being the first to suggest that Alver may have committed war crimes, Steve was afraid to take this seriously – scared, finally, to commit himself, reluctant to put all the pieces together. He would rather those were all back safely in their box, with a blank lid closed upon them.

Although I accused him of this, at the same time I realized that I wished to go on my own to Norway.

Alver had duped us, he had used us – because we were naive. As a pair, Steve and I would compromise and not be extreme. Because a woman had been killed in the park, not a man, I was ahead of Steve in my dreaming. Alone, I felt sure that I would be more focused.

A solo trip would cost half the price. One of us must stay to mind the shop. I seized upon these two pretexts, convinced that I would find Olsson waiting for me. I felt little need of Steve's "protection," which in any case he was not delivering – unfair and contradictory though that sounds.

A strained day passed. After we had eaten some lasagna that evening, Steve ferreted away to dislodge me from my position.

"A woman was killed with a knife in that park. When Norwegians get drunk they knife people."

"Not Olsson."

"He might see you as the cause of him losing his job."

"Women are stronger than men," I informed him. "Stronger than *nice* men," I added, to cushion his ego. Our relationship had altered. Damn Alver for this.

"How long will you give it before you quit looking?" Ah: my journey would be fruitless, so I could safely undertake it. Steve was vacillating, exonerating himself. Deep down, he was relieved that I was taking the initiative. I must not despise him for this, must not resent it. I should feel grateful, not betrayed.

"Ten days tops," I replied. A rational male answer, precisely timed, cut and dried.

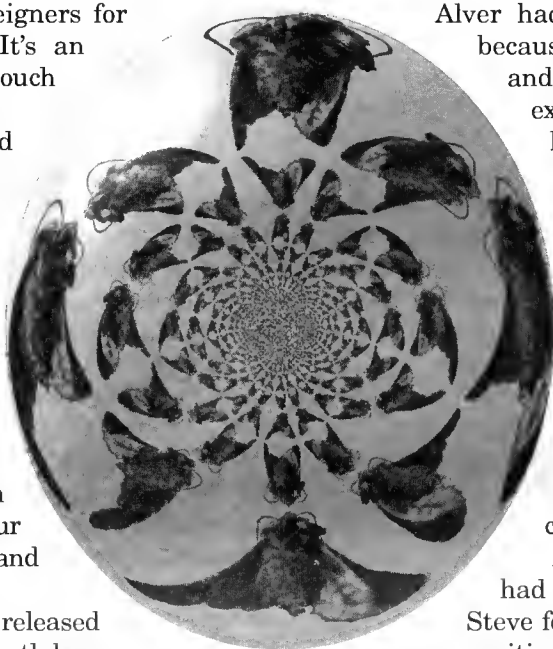
"I ought to come – I'm part of this too."

Men have this way of talking emptily to justify themselves, and never being able to shut up.

"Next Saturday there's a full moon. I should leave on Friday. Ticket, hotel, traveller's cheques," I recited.

"Will you phone me each evening?"

"If possible. Mustn't run up bills." Oh the reproachful look in his eyes – this could lead to more empty irritating words.



"We'll need to compare our dreams by phone."

We would not be sharing the same bed, but if we continued to dream of the park in a sense we would still be together.

"In Duty Free," he suggested, "why don't you buy a bottle of Rum and stock up on Coke in Oslo?"

Such a practical thought. Was it a trick question?

"I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I will. Good idea."

When the plane banked and levelled out, this time I did spot the park: grey granite geometry and lines of trees bisecting lawns. From an altitude of a few thousand feet everything looked so flat except for the trees backed by their shadows.

A venue for Odin? The Vigeland Park was a far cry from Valhalla. No pagan gods down there; just the struggle of life enshrined in stone – Nordic spirit. A big bottle of Captain Morgan rum bulked my hand luggage.

On the map of Oslo spread out on my lap, ironically there *was* an Odin Street not too far from the park. And just a stone's throw from the Comfort Hotel was a Valkyrie Way.

Even if the Valkyries managed to avoid colliding with a tram, their ride would be brief along the short stretch of street named in their honour. Those female dispensers of destiny to warriors in battle, those issuers of entry visas to Valhalla, would be obliged to pass and re-pass a Burger King – for the presence of which I was thankful. My take-away dinner of a Whopper and fries was merely expensive, not out of this world.

I phoned Steve to tell him I had arrived, and of my wonderful discovery of fast food so close by.

With mad cow and stodge still digesting in my belly, it was along non-heathen Church Way – Kirkeveien – that I walked late that night to revisit the park. The sky had clouded over. The moon coasted into sight, a spectral white yacht with a single full-bellying sail. Here was I, going to meet a drunk at a place where I had taken my clothes off, and he might not even be there. On this occasion I wore jeans, not a dress.

When I finally made my way up on to the granite plateau, there was Olsson, keeping a Vigeland vigil. A long scruffy raincoat hung open over checked shirt and Levis. As we gazed at one another he steadied himself against a granite buttock.

"You did not send me your name or address."

"I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry you lost your job. My name's Chrissy. Chrissy Clarke."

While the moon sailed into view and away again, I told him about the mysterious Mr Alver and the jigsaws and the dreams.

Dreams, oh yes, dreams. He had dreamed of me naked here among uniforms and torches. Sometimes me, sometimes a blond beauty. Before he accosted us that night, maybe he had been playing Peeping Tom and was now mixing up memory and dream, but I did not think so.

The chanting, the knife, the blood...

"*Blut. Stein. Macht*," I recited.

He nodded. "*Schild. Schutz*."

"And *Odin*. A toast to Odin, drunk in blood?"

"Toast?" he queried. And in Norwegian: "*Ristet brod*?"

He mimed buttering and biting.

"No, no, I mean," and I raised an imaginary glass, "Skol!"

Hardly the most sensible gesture to make to a man with a drink problem.

"Ah, *Skal*!" His brow furrowed. "They did not drink blood. They rubbed the blood on the stones. *Blut* is blood. *Stein* is stone. *Macht* means power, but is also a verb, *makes*."

Steve had been off-track.

"Blood-stone-makes-shield-defence." Carl's chant sounded like some strange version of the Stone-Scissors-Paper game. "Do you know of the SS?"

"Of course."

"They were the *Schutz-Staffel*, the defence squads. Actually, SS senior officers did not want to fight to the death in Norway. Some SS man must have been here, though. Some black magician."

"Stop, stop, you're losing me –!"

Carl had been supplementing his memories of history lessons in school by asking older people and looking in books.

Evidently Norway fascinated Hitler ever since the Fuhrer took a Strength-Through-Joy cruise to the fjords in the 1930s; and Himmler, head of the SS, was obsessed with the mystical meaning of nordic runes. Hitler saw Norway as the "field of destiny" of the war. Half a million German troops were to be stationed in this country. Big naval guns were stripped from battleships to be mounted in coastal forts.

Militarily this focus on Norway did not make much sense. Oh, there was a lot of coastline, controlling a vast swathe of sea, posing a threat to Allied convoys to Russia. Norway also owned a huge merchant fleet – the majority of those boats sought refuge in Allied ports. Due to shortages and sabotage and go-slows, Norwegian shipyards only completed two or three new vessels during the entire occupation. Demonstrably, the outcome of the war hung on events in Central Europe, not off on the margin of the map.

"Your own Winston Churchill, he was hooked by Norway too –"

"My Winston Churchill? Mine? He must have died before I was born."

"Has what happened here *died*? Even if a million tourists take pretty photos?"

I suppose, but for Winston Churchill, the whole of Europe might be a fascist empire nowadays. Nazis on the Moon. No Israel. Moscow, a radioactive desert. A swastika embellishing the Union Jack.

"Listen to me, Mrs Clarke –"

When Steve and I finally had a kid, I might become Mrs Bryant but so far we had seen no need for a wedding ceremony. To correct Olsson could lead to complications. I simply listened.

Were it not for Norway, apparently Churchill might not have risen to the top as the war leader best able to defy Hitler. The fall of Norway, with losses of British planes and personnel, toppled Neville Chamberlain. In actual fact British intervention in Norway was Churchill's own fault, but Chamberlain bore all the blame for it. Because the debacle made Churchill prime minister, Norway loomed unduly large in his mind.

In Hitler's mind there were Wagnerian considerations. The god Wotan, in Wagner's *Ring*, equals Odin, kingpin of the Viking pantheon. Several Nazi leaders, such as the racist Alfred Rosenberg, desired spiritual as well as political union with a nordic Norway under its home-bred National Socialist, Vidkun Quisling. The high echelons of the German Nazis were already into paganism and the occult.

Churchill and Hitler: I was getting this strong sense of two megalomaniacs (one good, the other evil) confronting one another globally, while both of them were obsessed about a country on the fringe – to the detriment of wider strategy.

Tormented by his ambiguous affinity to the Vigeland Park – which had been reinforced recently by the dreams – Carl Olsson had found out rather a lot. I suppose he knew the general drift already, and only needed to dig a bit deeper. After all, he wasn't an *ignorant* man! Quite fluent in English; and in German too, so it seemed.

When Germany was on the brink of defeat, Fortress Norway – *Festung Norwegen* – beckoned as the final bastion for the embattled Nazis, a worthy stage for the twilight of Gods and supermen, the final bonfire or the ultimate victory. It was touch and go whether Nazi leaders would relocate to Bavaria – or to Norway.

"General Bohme commanded the huge army here," Carl explained to me. "Bohme was crazy for Norway. Norway could be defended. And the Reichskommissar for Norway, Josef Terboven, he was fanatical about this too. Hitler very nearly came here instead of dying in Berlin. He hoped that new super U-boats based in Norway would turn the tide even if Germany fell –"

"Super U-boats?" I had never heard of any such thing. Were those real or imaginary?

"They were ocean-going monsters, Mrs Clarke, berthed in Bergen and in Trondheim."

But oil was in short supply, and the first super U-boat only sailed from Bergen, futilely, a couple of days before Germany surrendered.

In mid-March of 1945, Reichskommissar Terboven had summoned General Bohme and the naval commander to ask if they could vouch for the loyalty of their men in the event of Hitler and Himmler and gang coming to Norway. Even the bombastic Bohme could not guarantee this. The SS bigwigs did not favour *Festung Norwegen*. After Germany fell, Terboven blew himself up with a hand grenade.

"But some time in March, Mrs Clarke, the event happened here because here is so powerful and Nordic a place, even if Gustav Vigeland was raised in a fanatically Christian home –"

Evidently the sculptor's dad was a Bible-thumper. The torments of hell were a daily refrain in the Vigeland household.

"Too much Satan," Carl quoted. "That's what Gustav Vigeland said about his childhood. Not enough Jesus. A whole lot of darkness, only a little light. My own upbringing was not quite as bad – but always there were the sunny prayers for my soul! Because I was born under a cloud, a child of sin, illegitimate. A stained bastard –"

Vigeland's dad did loosen up eventually – because of alcohol and another woman, ill health and the failure of his little furniture business.

"So genuine darkness came. Yet here in the park is vigour and power, the thrust of nature. The life-force, a fierce power changing its shape as the god wills – the Odin force of old. Odin, that's what the Nazis saw here. A victory-force. Victory over enemies, over death..."

Carl clutched at the pocket of his raincoat. Hoping to find a bottle to dull himself. He must already have thrown the bottle away empty.

"Josef Terboven would have been here. And Quisling."

"And Knut Alver, whatever his real name is. Did Norwegians join the SS?"

"Oh yes. That was the Viking Division of the Waffen-SS. But it had some problems."

Though the Germans assured recruits that they were joining a pan-European force to bring a new order to the continent, training methods proved to be exceptionally brutal, so a lot of Norwegian volunteers deserted. Not Alver, obviously. He must have become an officer.

"And some magician was here. Some Nazis meddled with magic. Wotan-worship, Odin-worship. Blood-and-soil-worship. I hate all worship, Mrs Clarke! When I lost my job I went back to Bergen. This time I threatened. I really scared my fake parents. They must tell me why I was a scandal or I would burn the farm down. They thought I was going to kill them – that I would cut their pious psalm-singing throats."

Might he have clutched at his raincoat to see whether he had a knife in the pocket? A hideous vision came to me of butchered bodies in a farmhouse. If Carl Olsson was wanted by the police surely the construction company would have known and would have warned me. I must concentrate on him utterly, as if I was his sister and I loved him.

Gently I asked, "What did you learn, Carl?"

Why, he had discovered the shameful secret that his mother Christina – born late in 1944 – was the offspring of eugenic mating between a German Waffen-SS officer and a young Norwegian woman named Liv Frisvold. Liv Frisvold's brother Olav was a fanatical pro-Nazi who had joined the SS.

Liv shared Olav's fascist beliefs. She had volunteered, or been persuaded by Olav, to take part in the Lebensborn project – the "Fount of Life" breeding programme, by which prime Aryan males of the SS would bestow their genes upon perfections of Aryan womanhood. Liv's child would be a splendid bonding of Nordic and Teutonic, of Germany and Norway.

The baby had ended up fostered in Stavanger, with the cleansing name Christina. (My own name, almost!) At 18 years of age she disgraced herself by becoming pregnant by some American sailor. The foster parents packed her off to stay with relatives in Bergen, where she gave birth to a boy, who was Carl. Christina was unworthy to raise him – the boy must be separated from the stain of his past. So the Olssons had adopted him, to raise him on their farm as part of their family, a Christian duty. To them, the secret was confided, though they were ignorant of what became of Liv, or of Olav.

"When Christina was 21 she ran away from Stavanger. My adoptive parents say they think she went to America." Carl shuddered. "Do you know what I think? I think it was Liv Frisvold who was killed here in March 1945. My grandmother. In the blood-sacrifice."

He seemed calmer now.

"What were they hoping for, Carl? What were they trying to do?"

"Blood-stone-makes-shield," he said. "Whatever that means."

"What is Knut Alver trying to achieve now, half a century afterwards?"

Carl gazed at the monolith of naked bodies surging upward. "You came to find out, Mrs Clarke. It will come, it will come."

The orgasming come of a man. Or was he referring to some power gathering to erupt? The monolith was like a phallus. So rooted, so immobile.

"That other place – the dark place. Have you been there recently?"

"I cannot! Something stops me. Like a coat in a dream, wrapping me tight. A dream of myself and woman. The coat gets in the way. There is no way to take it off. Do you understand?"

"Maybe," I said.

He had not pressed his naked flesh against the granite girls when I took his photograph. *Where do you sleep?* I nearly asked him. Meaning, in a hostel? In some rented room? *Do you have savings?* I might give him the wrong idea.

"Now that you are here, Mrs Clarke, we can go to the dark place together. I will take you there tomorrow. Really, it is you who will be taking me."

Relief flooded me. "Let's do that, Carl. Tomorrow."

"In the afternoon the mausoleum is open. We will meet at your hotel and go by taxi. Without a taxi, we have too far to walk from the bus route, you see, and it is all uphill. Let me walk you back to your hotel."

Yes: away from this place. Back to Comfort. The desk clerk of that respectable establishment would not admit a drunk along with me in the middle of the night.

Ought I to offer to buy Carl Olsson lunch the next day? I did not want to, not in the hotel restaurant, at any rate – and its rate was steep. As we walked back along Kirkeveien I told Carl, "I found a place where I can afford to eat. There's a Burger King in Valkyrie Way."

"Tomorrow I shall only eat breakfast," he said. "We do not waste time. We need to be at the mausoleum by two o'clock before other people arrive. Not many visitors go, but early we can be alone. I think before we go tomorrow I only need a drink."

In the hotel bar, of course. At six pounds a glass, if beer was his tipple. I could hardly refuse.

Myself, I packed in as much breakfast as I could. Cereal, cold meats and cheese and bread. I debated whether to phone Steve to tell him I had met up with Carl Olsson, just in case... in case what? The night before, I had been alone with Carl in the park without incident. My sleep had passed without disturbance too. No, I would wait.

At 12.30 I was in the bar, nursing a half of draught Guinness, three pounds worth. McEwan's Export was also available on draught as well, not to mention bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale. When I expressed surprise to the barman, he said that thousands of Norwegians go from Bergen to Tyneside for shopping because Eng-

land is much cheaper. This could almost have been a pub in England, except that the job-lot of old books which served as décor on high shelves all had Norwegian or Swedish titles. Nobody else was using the bar yet. In came Carl, who had combed his hair and put on a Paisley tie that looked like a view down a microscope at swarming amoebas. He had cut himself shaving.

On impulse I told him, "I have a bottle of rum in my room."

"Ardour is of the earth," he said. At least, that's what I heard.

"Ardour?" I queried.

"Arler," he repeated, pointing to the bottles of Newcastle Brown.

"Oh, you mean *ale*. It rhymes with whale, in the sea."

"Ale," he resumed, "is of the earth, and spirit is of the sky. I think I need a drink of spirit."

The barman was hovering hopefully, polishing a glass, so I said to Carl, "Come up, then."

In the corridor upstairs, a North African was pushing a trolley of towels. A friendly grinning skinny fellow. As soon as we entered my room, protest burst from Carl.

"Fifteen per cent of our population today is Moslem, do you know? Here, in *Norway*. One and half people in ten. What does that tell you?"

I shrugged. I could guess what it might tell neo-Nazi nationalists.

"What it tells me," he said, "is that unskilled jobs go to Arabs, if I cannot drive again because I am not clear in my head."

In view of which, it may have seemed perverse of him to refuse any Coke to dilute the rum. Yet I understood when he poured a full glass and swigged it back neat.

"That tower of bodies!" he exclaimed. "The power dammed up, the climax delayed... birds, moths!"

"You dream about birds and moths, Carl –"

He glanced at his watch. "We must go to the dark place. You are my visa."

When snow thawed in the spring, streams must froth through these hilly woodlands of Slemdal, spilling over the narrow winding roads. Leafy gardens screened substantial old wooden houses. Stainless steel sculptures stood on one lawn: a giant cockerel, a unicorn. The nameplate on the gate-post was that of some company office, blending with nature. Quite a little paradise, hereabouts.

"Near here," Carl said, "the leader of the traitor Quisling's personal guard is killed with machine-pistols by men of our Home Front."

Blood had flowed here, as well as melting snow.

"In revenge the Germans shoot 14 men who are in jail for sabotage. Quisling is satisfied."

I sat in numb silence while Carl directed the taxi driver, who had never heard of the mausoleum. On a narrow lane, we pulled in beside a big red-brick building hemmed by trees, a cross between a barn and a basilica. The taxi fare, we shared.

Heraldic creatures decorated the brickwork of the frontage. In a little lobby, behind a table bearing pamphlets, a bearded young man sat. This earnest, spiritual-looking custodian eyed Carl with disapproving recognition.

"I am bringing a visitor from England," Carl announced in English.

The custodian promptly addressed me in soft-spoken English. "You're very welcome. Are you an artist?"

"A photographer," I told him.

"Ah... I regret... It is dark inside, you see, and photography is forbidden by the family."

"I don't have a camera with me. Not today."

We couldn't stand around chatting. Other people might come. Carl opened a stout wooden door for me.

Entering this place was like stepping inside a cavern illuminated by infra-red rather than natural light, as if here was the haunt of some nocturnal creature which remained invisible in the gloom. The lighting consisted of weak little spotlights focused on sections of the walls and the vault above. Nude figures were everywhere: babies and children, lovers, toiling adults, old folk on the verge of death. Copulation was in vigorous progress, and births – an umbilical cord the size of a hawser coiled between mother and newborn child. Dimly detectable figures caressed one another. They exchanged blows. They writhed in spasm. Such a surfeit of procreation and struggle and death.

Here was a Sistine Chapel frescoed by an artist who was definitely no Michelangelo. More like that Swiss fellow – rhymes with the radioactivity counter, Giger, that's him – with his monstrous biologies; although lacking Giger's artistic slickness. The subdued lighting seemed intended to hide the clumsiness of the obsessive work. Years this must have taken, years of crepuscular drawing and colouring. Mad, compulsive years brooding about the passions and mortality of the flesh.

Because of the utter dimness, figures emerged dreamlike, spectrally, and slid out of sight again. Hades, yes: a kind of Hades was here, full of dead shades reenacting their lives, bodies stripped bare and overblown. The dark side of the Vigeland Park, indeed.

Each footstep gave rise to a thrumming reverberation. The echo was intensified by the next footfall, into a slurring, sloshing boom. If I screamed in here, the acoustics might deafen me. In such gloom, the entrance was almost lost to sight as Carl guided me deeper, hand on my elbow. Here was a dream place, sealed away hermetically, not part of the natural world despite all its depiction of natural functions.

When we came to the far wall, the noise of our approach rose up to dizzy me, and Carl caught hold of me.

His tongue and his rummy breath invaded my mouth. His hands thrust under my jacket and sweater, and upward, but I had worn no bra for him to unclip. Turning me, he pressed my breasts to the frescoed wall. I felt his stiffness. This was insanity. At any moment the door might open. Visitors might enter. I did not cry out. The amplified echo would have shattered my skull.

"We must," he breathed in my ear. "We must." Must and lust and thrust and dust.

He unfastened my belt to release my jeans. Down to my knees he pulled the denim and my knickers. As his cock butted clumsily, I leaned numbly against the wall. Was this rape or necessity? Was it my recompense to him, or was it a way of unlocking secrets? His open zip was a rasp. Delving, his hands prised my legs apart. If I had not co-operated, he could never have cleaved me. Not last night in the park, not in the hotel room, but here and now in this perilous place, in this awkward

stance, I adjusted my position as best I could to accommodate him. The thought of disease crossed my mind, of AIDS. Of Steve so far away. At least I was on the pill. Had I taken my pill last night before I went to the park? My routine was all cocked up. *Wait a moment while I take a pill.* The mad magnified hum of Carl's panting deafened me. I bit on my lower lip.

Like some slut in a back street – of my imagination! – I held my sweater up so that my bare tits stayed in touch with the painted plaster. Here was a red light district of the mind, an infra-red light district.

Carl's weight squashed me against the wall, sandwiching me. A stranger coming into the huge mausoleum might fail to notice at first – then only vaguely spy a man in a long loose raincoat examining the furthest extreme of this place very closely. The circuit was complete: from Alver to me to the sculptures to Carl through Christina to Liv to the blood that was spilled to the monolith thrusting its shape in miniature into me. Images assaulted my mind, invading me.

Almost courteously, he had rearranged my clothing while I was still dazed by perceptions. What a gent this bulldozer driver was at heart. My knickers sat uncomfortably, twisted, clammy. I knew now that magic has laws – of affinity, analogy, contact, contagion, not the laws of logic but of primitive mentality.

"Those Nazis, they tried to make a magical barrier around Norway –"

"And Sweden too, because Sweden is joined to Norway like a Siamese twin –"

That had been the aim of the blood-sacrifice – to raise up an Odin force to resist attack, to repel invasion. The geometry of the sculpture park, the embodiment by the figures of lifelong struggle against death, of fertility, of will-power, that central surging phallus of bodies: these were perfect for this purpose.

"It was Liv Frisvold who died in the park. My mother's mother..."

Fanatical Nazi supporter, who had merged the Nordic and the Teutonic in the person of her daughter. Fertile mother. Valkyrie. She had volunteered; her brother had volunteered her. Either; both. Olav Frisvold had been there when she died, her throat cut.

"Olav Frisvold is Knut Alver, Carl! He wants the power –"

Germany surrendered. Fortress Norway failed as a scheme.

Nazis fled. Those who could. With gold and loot, those who could. By secret routes, to Paraguay, to Brazil. The force stayed locked up all these years in the core of the sculpture park, on that plateau, in that monolith.

"The birds were planes, flying to attack the Germans in Norway –"

"The barrier worked, Mrs Clarke. Not against enemies of the Nazis – against Olav Frisvold, who had fled, by denying him entry back again –"

"Stopping him from coming here in person –"

"To harvest the power –"

"To use it –"

We spoke as if wrapped in a *folie* for two, reinforcing each other's conviction, which few other people in the world would be able to share. Oh we were in duet.

"Because he is old –"

"Near death –"

"To use the power to delay death –"

"Take the energy into himself –"

"Make himself strong again –"

"Make himself *young* again –?"

"The way he was in 1945 when his sister died –!"

"Your photos smuggled out the images he needs, cut into thousands of tiny pieces, too small for the net to intercept what they carry –"

"The net around Norway, blocking him from linking with the power in the park –"

Just then, the door opened 30 metres or more away, and Carl released me. A middle-aged man and woman stepped respectfully into the obscure mausoleum as if into a church. The man removed his hat.

"I must come to England," Carl said. "Find my old-uncle –"

"Great-uncle –"

"Yes, great-uncle. Stop this happening. If it happens..."

Would the tip of the monolith erupt before the astonished gaze of Japanese tourists, geysering upward a flare of light, a blazing flux?

While, over in England, Alver stood naked in the little central space between the four circular jigsaws, each touching rim to rim, north, south, east and west... When that happened, nightmares would rage through my mind, and through Steve's mind, and through Carl's, roosting inside us, deranging us. We hurried past that middle-aged couple, who barely glanced at us.

However, in the lobby the custodian raised a hand. I suppose we were flushed and disarrayed. Did he have an inkling of what we had perpetrated in his temple of art?

"That lady who went inside," the bearded young man told me with quiet pride, "she is the professor from the University of Uppsala who has been researching the biography of Emanuel Vigeland for 15 years." As if I should be filled with respect and reverence. "You must not miss the museum."

"I thought *this* is the museum."

"This is the Doomsday – the Last Judgement. Next door is the gallery annex, with framed oil paintings. They are so colourful. Do see them."

"Thank you," I said.

"It is a privilege."

We went outside, into fresh air.

"Those paintings next door are not very good."

I would take Carl's word for it. A Saab with Swedish plates was the only vehicle in sight. How few people came here. We returned up the leafy lane. I hitched at my clothes in vain. The long hike downhill to the nearest bus route was likely to be uncomfortable.

"I must come to England," Carl persisted. "I must stay at your home."

He seemed to have little sense of what was feasible, and what was not. On the other hand, did I? I had just had a fuck with him – of an entirely functional sort – in that awful parody of the Sistine Chapel.

"What will we tell your husband, Mrs Clarke?"

Undeniably Carl was tenacious, even if there was a huge warp in his temperament. He was like some tree, erect but twisted through 90 degrees half way up its height.

"You may as well use my first name –"

His hand jerked up, to snatch my very words from the air, and his fist closed.

"No! It is too much like the name they gave to my mother. Your first name is personal. If I use it, I may think we like each other. I must call you Mrs Clarke." Wham-bang, no thank you, Ma'am. He was right, of course. "What do we tell Mr Clarke?"

"That we had a vision in the mausoleum?"

"A vision... Vidkun Quisling's brother Jorgen saw visions of Vidkun after the traitor was shot. Jorgen took drink and drugs and went to spirit, spirit –"

"Spiritualists?"

"Yes. Say to Mr Clarke that I gave you some hash to eat, do you understand hash?"

"Cannabis. Resin."

"Say that you felt you must press your breasts against a fresco, in the darkness, the same way you touched the sculptures. This put you in touch with the truth."

"And what put *you* in touch with the truth?"

"I held your hand – the way Olav Frisvold held yours."

"We held hands." How sweet.

"Like spiritualists at a see-ainsey."

"Séance."

"A séance," he repeated.

Would Steve swallow this? At least until everything was over, and Carl had returned to his own country, and I could explain... or not need to explain at all.

"How do we find Olav Frisvold, Mr Olsson? Do we make big prints of the photographs –"

"Yes, make big prints!"

"And stand on them naked?" I mimed cutting my thumb. "Spill a little blood them? And see what happens?"

He nodded vigorously. "Maybe. We shall do something!"

An immediate something would consist of Carl catching a train to Bergen, the overnight boat to Tyneside, then a National Express coach to our county – while I flew back home by air. Carl's route would cost less than mine. In another sense it had already cost him dearly. Me too, me too.

We proceeded downhill past foliage-screened gardens and serene rustic-looking homes.

He told me when to get off the bus. Himself, he stayed on board. Bye-bye until England, Mr Olsson.

Foremost, I craved a bath. Before I climbed into the tub in the Comfort Hotel I drank a big glass of rum as if I was some girl in trouble decades ago trying to induce a miscarriage. Light-headed from the spirit and the hot water, afterwards I made my bleary way to Burger King to take on much-needed ballast, a bacon double cheeseburger which I ate then and there. When I got back to the hotel, it was six o'clock, five o'clock in England. Steve would be heading home. I only intended to snooze for an hour. It was ten, and dark, when I woke up. What I ought to have done earlier, of course, was phone Scandinavian Air Services before I resorted to rum and soaking myself and eating and napping.

I dialled home.

"Back *tomorrow*?"

"So long as there's a seat free on the plane. I'll call you as early as I can, tell you the arrival time. There's too much to explain on the phone, Steve. I found Carl Ols-

son in the park – as I said I would. Mr Olsson is Alver's great-nephew, and Alver's real name is Olav Frisvold –"

And Carl Olsson was only an adoptive name; and his mother Christina had certainly not received that purifying name from her own mother; and I was not exactly "Mrs Clarke." Identities were haywire. Nothing was what it seemed, not least the sculpture park, pride of Norway.

"Listen, Steve: Mr Olsson is coming to England – by boat, 'cause that's cheaper. He'll need to stay with us till we can trace Frisvold. Get big laminated prints made of the four photos we took – same size as the jigsaws –"

"You're starkers on two of the photos."

The sheer irrelevance of this almost made me laugh. *Olsson stuck his cock into me in the mausoleum.*

"Norwegians don't bother about nudity. It's no big deal, remember? Mr Alver, unquote. So I'm hoping to see you tomorrow," I ended brightly.

"You've done *very* well. Hang on: do you want the prints landscape-style or cut to circles?"

"Circles, exactly like the jigsaws. All in one piece, of course."

"What do we *do* with them? What is Alver trying to do?"

"When I get home, Steve."

That night the dream was terrible. Torchlight flickered. I was shivering convulsively. The intent thin face of a weasely man wearing a peaked braided cap and round, wire-rimmed glasses swam before my eyes while strong hands held me upright. Voices were chanting. *Blut. Stein. Macht. Schild. Schutz.* The knife cut into my throat and I choked in awful pain.

I had to drink a great volume of Coke direct from the plastic bottle, gasping between gulps. Most of it, I vomited into the wash basin.

On the drive back from Heathrow Airport I told Steve about the supernatural barrier around Norway and about Carl's grandmother and her brother Olav, who was Mr Alver, who was now trying to extract the power from the sculpture park to cheat death – presumably!

The four big laminated pictures would be ready by the next day. Steve would jig-cut them into circles. When Olsson arrived, we would try to mimic whatever Olav Frisvold was attempting, to give us some clue to where he was.

Steve fretted. "Olsson may be thinking of, well, trying to kill Frisvold –"

"He said no such thing."

"It can't be a family reunion he's hoping for!"

"These dreams have to end! Frisvold probably killed enough people while he was in the SS."

"Listen to what you're saying, Chrissy! Frisvold may be a criminal, but we can't take the law into our own hands."

We had reached the high cut through the last rampart of the Chiltern Hills, the microwave relay tower atop rising like a pale lighthouse. From here the motorway plunged down into Oxfordshire and a vast vale of farmland, misty with distance and heat. We were discussing a murderer, and murder, and magic, which had contaminated us.

"God's Legion might believe us now, Chrissy. Ellison might."

"If Ellison was a high Anglican or Catholic he might have some ideas about the occult and exorcism. But a Baptist evangelist? Jesus and tambourines?"

"He has the vans. He has the troops."

"Ex-addicts and muddled runaways who have been born again. Will Frisvold grow *younger*? Or will he – will he shift into someone else's body? Some younger body?"

"Whose? He doesn't know about Olsson."

"He might have dreamed about him. That can't have been his plan to begin with. I'm thinking about you and me."

"He wouldn't want your body, Chrissy."

"What's wrong with *my* body?"

My body, in which Carl Olsson had rooted...

"Nothing at all! What I mean is, he wouldn't want a woman's body – not a Norse Siegfried like him. He may have someone lined up at his home. A gardener or valet. It's just that I can't imagine someone becoming younger. Skin freshening, muscles toning up, bones growing strong again. It's easier to imagine him swapping minds with a younger person."

"Then the newly inhabited body kills the feeble old husk?"

We were becoming a bit unhinged. Steve drove carefully, though, taking me home.

On my initiative we made love that night. A reunion of our bodies in bed; and we slept peacefully.

Two mornings later at Fernhill, I had a phone call from Newcastle. Olsson had disembarked from the overnight boat. He was about to board a National Express coach for a seven-hour journey to Blanchester, changing at Birmingham. Of course we would meet him.

And we did so, that evening.

While we were driving to Preston Priors, from the back of our car Olsson said, "I have dreamed badly."

"We have beer in the house –"

Olsson rooted in a duffel bag and produced a bottle of rum.

"I am bringing you a present."

Politely Olsson praised the fields of sheep and wheat, and the rolling leafy land. He admired Preston Priors as we entered it. The ironstone cottages were mostly slate-roofed though there were a number of thatches. Norman church; old vicarage and old school-house, no longer inhabited by either vicar or schoolma'am. Defunct pub, converted into a house. Big village green complete with genuine duck pond. Our own cottage was part of a terrace down less exalted Hog Lane.

And inside of Oak Cottage: exposed beams and joists in the kitchen-cum-dining room – also in the sitting room where the four big laminated photos lay on the carpet, rims touching. Steve had shifted furniture aside to make enough space. Olsson would be sleeping on the sofa, but only after the pictures had been stacked in the kitchen, covered with a tablecloth to hide them, neutralize them.

We ate noodles and meat balls and olive Ciabatta bread fresh from the oven and drank some red wine. At eight o'clock we adjourned to the sitting room. Hog Lane never caught any late sunshine. Perfectly reasonable to close the curtains and switch on a lamp. The low ceiling made any central light fitting impossible.

"Like a – séance." Olsson had remembered the word.

"Just wait till I bring the candles!"

We were used to power cuts in Preston Priors whenever there was a violent storm, so we kept a stock of candles. Candle-light would mimic the flicker of the torches in the sculpture park on that night years ago. While I fetched two packets and matches, Steve brought saucers and egg-cups for the candles to stand in. Olsson was peering at the pictures of Steve and of me on the floor.

"Bring a sharp knife from the kitchen," he said. "To stick in the space in the middle. Like a..." The name eluded him. Maybe he meant like the gnomon of a sundial. A spindle. An axis.

Whatever were we doing here in our sitting room in cahoots with a Norwegian who wasn't quite right in the head? Steve frowned at me, but we must follow our instincts. When I brought a kitchen knife Olsson stabbed the point down hard, right into the floorboard below. What did a mere cut in the carpet matter? Twanging the handle, he made the knife quiver. After Steve and I had lit all the candles, I switched off the lamp.

"So," said Steve, "do we stand together in the middle holding hands?"

Do we take our clothes off? I wondered. I felt no instinct to do so. Quite the contrary.

"Did you bring hash, Mr Olsson?" Of course he hadn't.

"I think," said Olsson, "we kneel down and each cut our finger a little on the knife. Rub our blood together. Rub it on the pictures. I think so. We repeat the German words."

Blood. Stone. Makes. Shield.

"Maybe in reverse. To take us back..."

So we crowded together on our knees, upon the pictures. Slicing our thumbs just a little on the knife blade, we mingled our blood, and smeared those big nocturnal images of the Vigeland Park.

"*Schutz. Schild. Macht. Stein. Blut,*" we chorused. If Hugh Ellison should somehow be listening at the window...!

Two dozen candle-flames began to rock. The flames dipped then they stretched up again as if they were being breathed in and out by some unseen presence.

"Uncle, where are you?" called Olsson. He said things in Norwegian and German. Soon he became frustrated.

"I need rum!" Rising, he stumbled to the kitchen.

"Christ," hissed Steve. "Rum and a knife –"

Returning with the bottle, Olsson knelt again. Squeezing the blade of the knife with his right hand, he jerked, then exposed his palm. Blood flowed from his life line and heart line. Gritting his teeth, he poured dark spirit over the bleeding wound. With a shudder, he drank from the bottle. Plunging his palm down upon the patch of exposed carpet, he screwed his hand around, chanting, "*Blut. Blut. Blut.*" Sounded as if great drips of liquid were plopping from a tap into a bucket of water. What was I supposed to put on that stain to get rid of it? White wine? Salt? Would he catch hold of me next, smearing my skin and my clothes? As the candle flames danced, highlights gleamed in the laminated pictures, and shadows lurched around our sitting room.

Then the flames were burning evenly. All was calm. Nothing whatever was happening. If anything had been on the point of happening, it had faded away.

I dressed Olsson's hand. We opened beers, and

swigged, sitting together on the sofa.

"Tomorrow night," he vowed, "we will do it again, but I spill more blood. I felt it start to come, but we lost it. We must all spill blood. Maybe you buy a hen."

Poor hen. Poor carpet. Poor us.

When the doorbell rang insistently, the clock on the bedside table showed two in the morning. Steve lurched to the open curtains, and peered into Hog Lane.

"Come here," he whispered. Again, the summoning peal. In my pyjamas, I joined Steve. Below: a black car, a Mercedes.

"It's Alver's car. Frisvold's –"

Up through the floor came noises of blunder. Olsson was up and about. Before either of us could decide what to do, we were hearing voices downstairs. Olsson must have opened our front door.

"Stay here, Chrissy –"

"No!"

The old gent had relapsed into one of the pine carver chairs in the kitchen. Olsson was leaning against our dresser crowded with plates and ornaments, the knife in his bandaged hand. On the red floor tiles, in a heap: the tablecloth.

"Both of you come in here now! Sit and put your hands on the table –" Frisvold's voice held a weary authority, and his liver-spotted hand, a nasty-looking pistol. I had never seen a gun before in real life, but the name Luger occurred to me.

No smartly tailored suit, tonight. Before driving here, he must have thrown on whatever came to hand. Old trousers and sweater, under an open overcoat. No socks on his feet, just brown leather slippers.

"Sit!"

Of course we obeyed. Frisvold spoke to Olsson in Norwegian. Carl retorted now and then. I could grasp not a word of what they were *snakking* about, which was about the only Norwegian word I knew apart from *skal*. *Snakker*, to speak. *Jai* don't *snak Norsk*. After a while, I interrupted:

"You gave us nightmares, Mr Frisvold. Your life's a nightmare."

"What do you know?" Was he asking me, or sneering?

Anger boiled in me. "How about you sacrificing your sister in that park in 1945?"

He winced. "My sister wished that, to buttress the Reich. So that there could be some strength left! So that Bolshevism would not wash over Europe the way it did. We have had to wait 50 years for the red tide to go away. She was no faint-heart like my countrymen. What I regret is the failure, the abject surrender. Your interference is making her die in vain once more."

"Excuse me, but *you* came to us – to use us."

Frisvold peered derisively at the bandage on Carl's hand. "Now I have found her grandson. My own blood, out for revenge – something we Norwegians seem to specialize in. Put that silly knife away, Carl Olsson. You hurt your own hand, you fool."

"My blood brought you here, Uncle."

Frisvold inclined his head, conceding. Having won his point, Olsson placed the stained knife on the dresser next to a Delft milkjug, then subsided into a chair.

The old man tutted exasperatedly. "Revenge, revenge.

Thousands of patriots persecuted for decades after our so-called liberation – and now me, to be thwarted. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? You are ignorant. Your heads are full of lies."

"You'll be telling us next," Steve cried, "that the concentration camps were a lie!"

"I did not know about those. I never saw one."

No doubt my expression was jeering.

People often talk wildly to justify themselves, but the spin which Frisvold put on the Second World War and on his country's part in it soon had me reeling – and Carl as well. Before long Carl was sitting with one hand clutching his head, his eyes red with rum and beer and fatigue. Steve, too, was fairly pop-eyed.

Quisling, shot in 1945 for his betrayal of Norway? Quisling who had given his name to treachery just as Judas Iscariot had? According to Frisvold, Vidkun Quisling was one of the great humanitarian figures of the 20th century, and one of the most perceptive.

What did anyone know about Quisling? Scarcely more than his despised, hated name! Yet during the early 1920s, apparently this very same Quisling had saved a fifth of a million people from starvation in the Ukraine, almost single-handedly. During 1922, with Soviet consent, he was running the Russian railway system to improve famine relief. So impressed was Trotsky, that he asked Quisling to reorganize the Red Army. A rival offer came from Imperial China, to reorganize their administration. To prepare for this task, Quisling learned Chinese – but the Chiang Kai-Shek revolution intervened. That was the sort of man we were talking about; not that Frisvold himself had personally been close to Quisling. Quisling was too fastidious.

In his youth, Quisling had learned Hebrew because he was deeply religious. What's more, he was such a nifty mathematician that he understood quantum theory. He also understood what was going to happen to Norway, land of make-believe, when the great powers began brawling, unless his countrymen *did* something. Hence, his National Unification Party, *Nasjonal Samling*, NS. That was no Nazi party. Far from it. The NS aimed at putting some backbone into Norway and saving its independence, the way the Finns had saved themselves.

Blind, selfish, and lazy, the Norwegians possessed little more than a police force, even though Norway was one of the easiest countries in the world to defend with anything more than a microscopic army. Throughout the 1930s Quisling was the Churchill of Norway, the lone voice warning of national suicide, and being abused for his pains. Frisvold certainly had it in for his countrymen.

Did Quisling conspire with the Nazis? Not a bit of it. Quisling stepped in to frustrate the Germans and minimize the effects of an occupation. When the invasion started, the King of Norway and the General Staff had more important matters on their minds – would you believe they were enjoying a Roman-style banquet, accompanied by a lecture on Gastronomy in Ancient Rome?

Off his own bat, an elderly Norwegian officer did manage miraculously to sink the German flagship, sending all the occupation officials and their documents to the bottom of the Oslo Fjord.

"His reward after the war was to be prosecuted as a traitor, because he belonged to Quisling's *Nasjonal*



Samling! This NS member was *sinking* the Nazi flag-ship, not cheering and saluting it –”

Sinking the flagship gained Oslo precious hours, which were squandered. Did the Norwegian government announce immediate mobilization over the radio? On the contrary, they sent out call-up papers by snail-mail.

And then the government and the King ran away, with not a word to the people, without making any arrangements for maintaining public services.

If Quisling had not stepped in, Norway might have been treated like Poland. By a ruse, Quisling managed to keep the home shipping fleet in Norwegian ownership. He kept the Norwegian flag flying over parliament, at least for a while. He was so obstinate. Ribbentrop loathed him. Quisling even obtained amnesties for former enemies of his, whom the Germans arrested. He was always at odds with Reichscommissar Terboven. Quisling did say a few silly things about Jews but the fact is when round-ups loomed, he delayed these for ten days so that Jews could get away. It was his own *Nasjonal Samling* members who helped Jews make their escape to Sweden. The only voice actually protesting about arrests of Jews was the *Nasjonal Samling* Bishop of Oslo – so he got ten years in jail after the war.

Topsy-turvy, indeed.

“Our nation could never come to terms with any of these truths,” Frisvold ranted on, “or that a great debt of gratitude was owing! Quisling’s name was blackened. Vengeance was easier – vindictive reprisals which went on for years. During the mockery of a trial Quisling endured, the authorities were sticking wires in his cranium like medieval inquisitors to test if he was sane. Or to send him insane. This was while he was trying to conduct his own defence on a starvation diet. Give him no more than a little herring for lunch! – even though no Norwegians ever went hungry the way the Dutch did during the war, thousands dying of starvation. Our King even wanted Quisling’s execution to be deliberately botched, to torment him –”

If Frisvold was telling the truth, this was shocking. Though why was he telling us at all? After decades of pretending to be somebody else, at last he had an audience? One from whom he might win sympathy? Whom he might convert to his point of view – so that we would voluntarily step aside, instead of him shooting us? The gun in his hand seemed so evil. Though if it were not for the gun, would we be listening?

Olsson broke in. “Quisling got no amnesty for men who were shot in reprisal after the Home Front killed the chief of his bodyguard!”

“Pah, he couldn’t. If he did not agree to it, the Germans were going to shoot even more prisoners. The Home Front’s pig-headed adventures only made the Reichscommissar and the Gestapo take off the kid gloves.”

“What are those gloves?”

“The Home Front provoked Terboven and the Gestapo so they stopped acting softly. Terboven was glad of any excuse.”

“Why was that?” asked Steve.

“Because Josef Terboven was a spiteful bully. Inferiority complex cloaked in arrogance. Norway was the trial run for him becoming Reichscommissar of Britain if an invasion succeeded – did you know that?”

Steve shook his head.

“Yes, Terboven would have been boss of Britain! You know nothing, do you? Quisling warned the Home Front but they played into Terboven’s hands in his contest with Quisling. That’s what use the Home Front were.”

Olsson moaned. “At home we had a photo on the wall, of a big German general saluting a lad of the Home Front as he surrendered to him.”

“Oh that famous photo! It was staged, for public relations. No German could *surrender* to any Norwegian. Thanks to Quisling, Norway and Germany signed an armistice in 1940 so that they would not be at war. The government-in-exile knew nothing about this, because they had run away.”

“What people know, is a lie?” cried Olsson. “And the real resistance was Quisling?”

“That’s right. Such truths are unacceptable.”

Frisvold was telling us that nothing was as it seemed – so therefore neither was he as he seemed. I could hardly square this with my dream.

“Is this supposed to clear you of blame? Blame for joining the SS? For the blood-sacrifice of your own *sister*? Were you and Quisling trying to *protect* Norway there in the Vigeland Park?”

Frisvold uttered a croak of a laugh. “Quisling was no part of that! He was so religious he wanted to resign during the occupation to become a lay pastor. Josef Terboven was there in the park, the Reichscommissar – he worshipped Hitler.”

“What did this Terboven look like?”

“Thin. Round spectacles with wire rims. Receding hair, parted on the left, oiled and combed back. He looked like a human rat, though he wore a fine uniform.”

That was the man I had seen in my dream – but who was it who actually cut Liv Frisvold’s throat?

“Some of the SS were there,” Frisvold went on. “And Weiner, the Gestapo chief, who shot himself later on –”

“But *you* got away.”

About this, he was willing to tell us too.

All along, the Nazi high command had been planning to retreat to Norway...

“Or Bavaria,” I said, remembering.

Oops, pardon me. This was merely another example of my ignorance – of how I swallowed clichés like a lazy fish a pretty fly.

The belief that the Nazis intended to hole up in the Bavarian Alps was a masterpiece of black propaganda, probably the only real jewel of German disinformation. On the strength of that Eisenhower diverted a whole army – regardless that the Allies had cracked the German codes and ought to have known better. Norway was always the real destination for the final showdown.

Yet by then there was too much chaos. The red tide, flooding from the east. Hitler had lost his marbles, too far gone in madness to issue sensible orders.

So: get out of Norway or else face the music.

In spite of personal animosities Josef Terboven had set aside a plane – a bomber – for Quisling to escape in. And for other people, of course. Frisvold would have been on that bomber, which would rendezvous with a long-distance U-boat, capable of reaching South America.

Naïvely and stubbornly, Quisling chose to remain in Norway. He thought that his faultless logic and patri-

otic service would be appreciated. Delay, delay.

And then, from Berlin via Denmark, arrived the *Belgian* fascist leader, Leon Degrelle.

"Who?" I asked.

Pardon our ignorance, again.

In cliché land Degrelle would be the Belgian counterpart of Quisling – if Quisling had ever been the collaborator he was slandered as being. This Degrelle – endowed with sublime good luck – was the only figure of such wicked prominence to survive and thrive anywhere in Europe after the war. He was The One Who Got Away – to Spain.

Leon Degrelle... Pay attention, Chrissy.

Frisvold was only acquainted with the Belgian for a very short time in Oslo, but it was an intense acquaintance. Degrelle loved hanging out with collaborationists, bragging and drinking and revelling in the trappings of Nazism. Germans themselves were never close mates of his. Even after fighting alongside them, he still never learned a word of German.

"Mais moi, je parle Français," Frisvold confided. "Leon's life and exploits were poured into my ear. What a bond developed between us."

Because of both men's service in the SS. And because Frisvold could *snakke Norsk* and *sprechen Deutsch*, which was of invaluable help to a monolingual Belgian marooned in Oslo with just a few cronies.

Frisvold had served the Reich – and Degrelle had formed Walloon and Flemish storm-trooper brigades, which became part of the Waffen-SS. After the Allies overran Belgium, Degrelle and his Walloon Legion fought the advancing Russians in a last ditch attempt to save Berlin. Failing, he and a few associates left the Legion in the outskirts of Berlin and fled.

Degrelle had friends in Spain, and resources tucked away there, money and gold – as well as a lot of money in the South of France (but France was out of bounds). Always Degrelle was financially canny. He married money (though this never stopped him from cheating on his wife). He hit a jackpot when he borrowed money from his own Rexist Party's coffers to buy a big perfume company which the Germans sequestered from its Jewish owners.

Spain spelled sanctuary. It was with Frisvold's assistance that Degrelle and his now-tiny party were able to commandeer a light aircraft with long-range fuel tanks and the scarce fuel to fill them.

"Don't tell me you're a pilot too."

"No, Miss Clarke, the pilot was a Belgian, Robert Frank."

What a journey that was, flying almost 1500 miles by night over Europe, variously embattled or liberated. Maybe Frisvold had been telling the truth when he said that aeroplanes terrified him. This plane only barely reached Spain, crash-landing out of fuel on the beach at San Sebastian just a few miles over the border. Degrelle hurt his foot. Into hospital he was whisked. Gener-

alissimo Franco was not best pleased at his uninvited fascist guest, but being a fascist himself he prevaricated about extradition. Four months after the crash-landing Degrelle vanished from hospital. The Spanish government denied all knowledge. Ten years later Degrelle emerged in public from the protection of his Spanish friends. He prospered. A construction company owned by him built air bases for the Americans in Spain.

"He paid you well for the plane," Olsson said.

I was keenly interested in sources of wealth. Frisvold pursed his lips. He was evasive about what happened to him after San Sebastian, though obviously from wherever he had kept tabs on what was happening in his homeland. I imagined the wily buccaneering Degrelle nursing a bag of diamonds, sequestered from Jewish dealers in Antwerp – or him entrusting his new buddy Frisvold with gold bars to take to Paraguay to establish a bolt-hole in case Spain let him down...

"Actually, Miss Clarke, many Norwegian families made a lot of money during the war by supplying the legitimate needs of the occupying authority. Selling their trees, supplying construction material – this was perfectly proper under the terms of the Berne Convention."

Frisvold may have taken gold of his own on that plane, transmuted from some family forest by the alchemy of the occupation.

"Perfectly proper and legal!"

"Are we supposed to think, Mr Frisvold, that you're more sinned against than sinning?"

Exasperatedly: "Norway almost went bankrupt after the war by punishing the so-called profiteering families, wrecking their businesses in an orgy of revenge! The Norwegian government asked the British what you intended to do about your own collaborators. The people of your Channel Islands: those were in the same situation. London told Oslo it was going to do nothing – forget about it. Norwegians could never take advice. If America had not stepped in with lavish aid, Norway would have gone down the drain –"

"Things seemed different during much of the war," Frisvold insisted. "Hitler looked set to win. Thousands of Norwegians fought the Red Army alongside the Germans. Not against Britain, never – only against Communism, which was to eat up half of Europe."

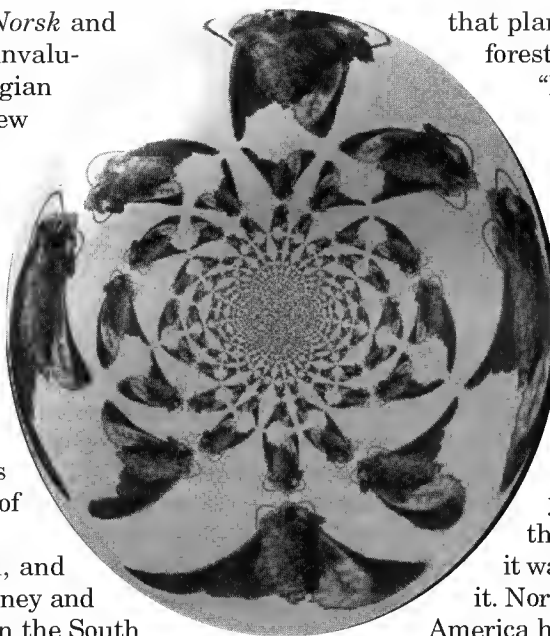
Only Quisling had the genius to see what eluded even the Germans, namely that the Hitler-Stalin pact would fall apart – and what would stem from this: *red tide*. Norwegians were glad to volunteer to strengthen Norway's muscle. They were the best fighters since the Vikings.

"They *deserted*," Olsson contradicted him.

"Rubbish! The Germans decorated many for gallantry. Fifty fought to the last defending the Reich Chancellery."

"It must have been crowded there, what with Belgians and Norwegians and goodness knows who else."

Frisvold glared at me. "Have you seen a trawler net being winched tighter and tighter?"



"A net with sharks in it," Steve said.

"And with holes in the net," retorted Frisvold. "All these Front Fighters from Norway could have been the nucleus of Norwegian defence after the war. Instead, they were imprisoned then forced to be street-sweepers. Even now, Norway refuses its responsibilities in Europe and prefers to dream."

"We have been dreaming," I reminded him.

"May I have a drink of water?" he asked me.

One thing which Quisling did not favour was a special Germanic SS Norway Force, under the ultimate command of Himmler. Quisling even started a whispering campaign against this thousand-strong force, which was destined not only to fight Communism but also for other duties in the Greater Reich.

"Things seemed different," repeated Frisvold. "Events had an inevitability. I am haunted by certain brutalities, but at the time... The Americans committed atrocities in Vietnam, did they not? No one knew about the death camps. My goal was Nordic-Teutonic union against Slavic-Asian Bolshevism. My sister's goal too. Odin power —"

Culminating in that occult ritual at the eleventh hour in the Vigeland Park...

"Do you understand now?" asked this old man with the gun. With his free hand, he stroked the uppermost picture of the park, of me in the buff embracing granite. "I have the right to use the energy because of my sister. She was a valkyrie! Her participation was voluntary. She would allow no one to take her life but me. Not Terboven, certainly! *Me*, her adored brother, her hero. Oh, Liv," he cried out. "*Life* is the meaning of her name!"

This was deeply sick.

"I have the right to become young again," Frisvold declared. "I have the right to live again."

"By stealing someone's body?" I shouted at him.

He looked amazed. "Of course not. How could *that* happen? I shall live again by reincarnation."

Surely the old man was deeply mad.

Then he began to tell us about the Nazi scientific expedition to Tibet...

Hitler believed in reincarnation. "The Soul and the mind migrate, just as the body returns to nature" — thus spake the Führer, though not in public.

The Gauleiter of Thuringia, Artur Dinter, said the same thing much more openly. An early Nazi recruit, Dinter published a book preaching reincarnation — and also demanding that the Bible should be re-organized. Get rid of the entire Old Testament with all its Jewish blather. Cut out all the Epistles of St Paul and all of the Gospels except for that of mystical St John. Even St John's Gospel would need a touch of rewriting to remove Jewish taint. The resulting Bible would have been somewhat slim: from Word-made-Flesh to Apocalypse in a few quick steps. Politically this was embarrassing for Hitler. The Führer hoped to win the support of Evangelicals and Catholics. Banning most of the Bible was not a vote catcher. So this particular gauleiter was ousted from the Nazi Party. On the subject of reincarnation, Adolf still saw eye to eye with Artur Dinter.

Heinrich Himmler also believed firmly in reincar-

nation — as well as in runic magic; the black twin lightning flash symbolizing Himmler's SS was the double Sig rune. Himmler adopted the ideas of a man called Karl Eckhart, author of a book titled *Temporal Immortality*.

"According to Eckhart, each man is reborn as one of his own blood-descendants —"

Olsson shivered, but the look in Frisvold's eyes dismissed his great-nephew from matching any such criteria.

Himmler was on the verge of distributing a special order of 20,000 copies of Eckhart's book to the SS when Hitler put his foot down, again for political reasons. Heinrich, head of the SS, was sure that he himself was the reincarnation of a previous Heinrich who, a thousand years earlier, established the Saxon royal family and thrust the Poles eastward (not as in North and South Poles, but as in untermensch people). The SS was carrying on his ancestor's splendid work.

Where, oh where, might one discover the recipe for reincarnation? Where else but in Tibet, one of the secret places of the world where the rebirth of lamas and Dalai Lamas was routine!

The result was the SS science outing of the late 30s in search of arcane wisdom. And the expedition did strike pay-dirt, according to Frisvold.

The old man jawed on about mandalas, Tibetan meditation-mazes which were very like the runic maze in the Vigeland Park. He spoke about some Tibetan rite of "Cutting Off" involving a magic dagger, which stirred up occult forces, if any were in the vicinity. The cutting-off of Norway from Allied attack, hmm? This would be a Nordic, Teutonic rite, not an Asian ritual; a rite from the land of Valhalla, where Odin chose slaughtered heroes for immortal struggle; a rite where blood played a central role. Yet behind it, lurked...

"The power to reincarnate me, because my blood-sister gave her life in a wasted sacrifice." Frisvold's scowl challenged any of us to contradict him. "After you stop your meddling and after I succeed, you will be free of your nightmares. After I am born again, carrying on the cycle of life with full self-awareness of who I was."

We were enmeshed in this now. "How can you do it?" Steve whispered.

By way of reply Frisvold touched the muzzle of the Luger to his lips.

The gun was not for *us*, although he used it to intimidate and control us. Shooting us might have been bad *karma* immediately prior to a reincarnation. No, the pistol was meant for himself. While he knelt amongst the images of the Vigeland Park back in his house, wherever that was, he would stick the muzzle of the Luger in his mouth and fire a bullet into his brain. His soul and his mind would transfer into some embryo or foetus to be reborn elsewhere.

"You have money," Olsson shouted out suddenly. "I have no job."

Frisvold had not come here expecting to meet his great-nephew and to be asked for cash. But he delved in his coat pocket.

"Before I came out I picked up my wallet up. Who knows, I might need petrol." How many miles had the Mercedes travelled tonight? Very likely that car was leased, not owned outright. Frisvold's house was probably rented. He would not be leaving any assets behind

him.

"You can have whatever is in here. I shall not need it after tonight."

"Petrol money," sneered Olsson. "You have put your wealth in a Swiss bank, is that it? With a secret number which you will remember!"

A look of momentary alarm crossed Frisvold's face, to be replaced by smug triumph. Where else would his wealth be safe until he grew up again? It made perfect sense.

"What if you are reborn an *African* or an *Arab*, Uncle?"

"No, there will be some affinity. Racial affinity." Again, that croak of a laugh. "Maybe I will be born a Finn."

"What if you *are* born African and poor as shit?" I jeered at him.

A firm shake of the head. "My soul and mind will find a proper abode."

Steve could not contain himself. "What are you going to do when you're reborn? It's years and years from cradle to being able to stroll into some bank in Zurich!"

"What do you recommend, Mr Bryant?"

"Me?"

"Yes, what would you do? I'm interested."

"Well, I would..." Steve had spoken without thinking, and promptly ground to a halt.

"You are utterly helpless. Dependant. Suppose that you can make your newborn mouth shape words properly. Do you confide in your new parents? You risk being smothered as a devil-child – or becoming a media sensation! What benefit is there? Do you tell the truth about yourself? What you achieved is not easily repeatable by other people! You are a freak – and a sort of monster, because you cut your sister's throat. Do you invent a false past life?"

Steve was at a loss. Frisvold had had far longer to think through the implications.

"Will your new parents co-operate? Will they hurry to Switzerland, equipped with that magic number and password, and then surround you with luxury? A giant TV screen showing adult movies to while away the boredom? A baby's mini-gym, to help you mature faster? You are a lottery ticket they have won! Once they have collected, they can tear up the ticket."

He had arranged some kind of password for identification in Zurich in whatever future year. Number plus password would give access to whoever turned up, white or black, young or even younger.

"You are a baby, Mr Bryant, who must follow a biological plan for growing up. What will you do?"

"I don't know," Steve admitted.

"The best strategy is to reveal *nothing*. It is to pretend to be a baby – to accept the boredom and the indignity. To become a young boy – and to grow older till you are a youth. You must try not to seem too strange to your parents. You can be precocious, something of a prodigy. When you are 15 or 16 you can escape – with

a whole new lifetime ahead of you."

"You can't perform the trick a second time, because you used up the power?"

Frisvold sipped water. "I think physical immortality is around the corner, for the rich. Machines the size of molecules will repair the body."

"What if you're born crippled?" Steve persisted.

"I take the risk. It is better to be born than not be born."

"What if you *like* your new parents?" I asked him.

"I must certainly seem to like them. And maybe I will. Now," he said, "I want you to carry these pictures to my car."

"What about me, Uncle Olav?" clamoured Olsson.

A smile flitted. "You can try to find me again. The same way the Tibetan priests set out to find a reincarnated one. It can take them years of travel and prayer and divination. And, of course, the child must be willing to be recognized."



He had driven away, taking our pictures with him. Frailty aside, he still had reserves of stamina.

How long ago did he establish himself in this country, poised just across the North sea from his homeland? Britain is an island, surrounded by a cordon of sea. Therefore it is similar to Fortress Norway with its invisible magical girdle. No doubt he waited as many years as he dared before setting events in motion – no point in premature suicide! Then opportunity

presented itself in the form of *Majig Mementoes*. Without us what would he have done? I doubt if he would have told us.

Olsson was counting the money in the old man's wallet – looked to me like a couple of hundred pounds. A bastardly inheritance.

"Will you go back home soon?" I asked.

Sourly: "To the land which is not as it seems – if Uncle Olav is accurate. Will we dream anything when he kills himself tonight?"

Would we have any proof of the event?

My dream had changed. I was a statue on a plinth, frozen in mid-stride. In my outstretched hands I held a naked child of granite, who stared at me by starlight. The child's knees were up in the air as if moments earlier I had snatched him from his potty. Chubby arms reached towards me, as I held him at arm's length.

And then I was running across grass, naked and barefoot, bearing the child ahead of me.

On the radio in the morning, the final news headline is sometimes a quirky piece, which then drops into oblivion.

"In Norway last night," said the news reader, "lightning struck a pillar of granite figures in the middle of Oslo's sculpture park – splitting the top open like a banana, according to reports. The sculpture park is one of the principal sights of the city, visited by as many

tourists as the Viking longboats. Skies were totally clear at the time. Experts are investigating.”

Agog, we sat in silence through the whole of the news but the oddity received no further coverage.

Olsson clapped his hands, and winced. “I shall go back today. I think I can visit the park now without drinking – and for the last time too. Soon I will be able to build a dam. Can you drive me to the bus station?”

Of course we could; and gladly.

A week later, the police called at Fernhill. By ill chance Hugh Ellison was in the car park, talking to a couple of young legionnaires. God’s centurion intercepted the two occupants of the police car, and soon he was guiding them helpfully in our direction.

“These are the proprietors of *Majig Mementoes*: Miss Chrissy Clarke and her partner Mr Steve Bryant.”

As Ellison dallied, a chunky uniformed man in his mid-30s identified himself as Detective-Sergeant Curry, and his younger brunette female colleague as Detective-Constable Carroll.

Curry produced photographs of the pictures of Steve and me in the sculpture park by night. Each of the laminated circles was propped against a background of striped wallpaper. In miniature but still identifiable, despite our faces being averted, was my long dark hair and bare buttocks, and Steve’s skinny frame, splayed against granite nudes. Craning to see, Ellison sidled forward. Oh of course, our business sticker had been attached to the otherwise blank jigsaw boxes.

“Do you recognize these?” Curry asked.

A special commission for a Norwegian client, name of Mr Alver, said I.

“*Special*,” Ellison echoed softly. Curry seemed content for him to remain while we were being questioned.

Sculpture park in Oslo; sentimental journey on an old man’s behalf, et cetera. An eccentric old gentleman: he read about us in the newspaper, in the special supplement featuring Fernhill last year. We never found out where he lived.

“Did you do other poses for this client?” DS Curry asked.

“Poses? Of course not.” The whole point of the commission was the sculpture park. Norwegians thought nudity was normal. Anyway, Alver was an old man.

“Was an old man?”

“I cut those jigsaws last year,” Steve explained.

The DS made a show of examining the photos. “Excuse me, but these aren’t jigsaws.”

“Those are the pictures before being cut up.”

“Before being jiggled. I see.” In the detective’s mouth the word jiggled sounded suspect and dirty.

I could see the slope that we were about to slide down. How could there be pristine versions of the pictures? What is the production method? Name of the printing company, if you please! A call would prove that Steve had the copies made just over a week ago. As yet, no mention had been made of Frisvold being dead – assuming that he was. We – Steve mustn’t – fall into the trap of revealing that we thought so.

“You said you never knew his address,” said DC Carroll. “How could you do business with him?”

“Mr Alver always came here.”

“Always?”

“Twice. Once to commission, once to collect.”

“How did he pay?”

Oh not the unrevealed income angle!

“What is this about?” I asked the woman detective. “I’m mystified.”

“We’re puzzled too,” said Curry. “We hope you can cast some light.”

“On what?”

“On Mr Alver’s death. We entered his property yesterday evening following reports of curtains staying closed although his car was there.”

“Where is his, er, property?”

Curry ignored my question. “Your Mr Alver had been dead for several days. Maybe a week.” What response was he expecting? *Poor fellow! Or: Was it a heart attack?*

“How?” was what I said.

“He blew his brains out – all over your jigsaws. He had been kneeling among them, stark naked.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, “that’s awful!” *Beware, beware: Curry hadn’t said what he used to blow his brains out.*

I chose my words carefully. “Last year he told us that he wanted to come to terms with his life – by doing those jigsaws of his beloved homeland – before the grim reaper came. That’s what he said.”

“Bit of an enigma, your Mr Alver. What else did he say?”

“Well, he couldn’t travel much because he hated planes, and boats made him seasick – that’s why we went to Oslo for him. What do his neighbours say? The people who reported about the curtains.”

“You appear to have had more contact with him than his neighbours.”

“Oh no, it was only business.”

Shit, had anyone down Hog Lane seen the Mercedes at dead of night?

“I’m still puzzled,” Curry continued, “about the, um, uncut versions of the jigsaws.”

“You can’t assemble a jigsaw without a picture to look at –”

The DS studied Steve. He scanned our little showroom, where all jigsaw boxes carried illustrations. “Your boxes, the ones in his house, those had no pictures on them.”

“Ah: the pictures would have been too small for him to see clearly.”

Do shut up, Steve.

“I see,” Curry said. “And there’s nothing more you can tell us about Mr Alver?”

Sensibly, Steve just shook his head.

“How about you, Miss Clarke?”

“Not that I can think of right now. Mr Alver wasn’t very forthcoming. When he said that about the grim reaper I never realized!”

“But you were prepared to take nude photographs of yourselves for him?”

“That was art.” Behind me, I heard Ellison sniff.

Curry regarded the framed jigsaw of the two pig-tailed girls in polka-dot dresses beside the Fountain of Trevi. “Unlike your other jigsaws...”

“He paid us in cash, by the way,” I told DC Carroll. She raised an eyebrow, but after all the police are not the tax authorities. “And oh, he used a credit card for our hotel bookings. American Express, I think.”

"You think."

"Suicide, that's so terrible." As if this was only now fully registering on me.

"Especially," the woman detective said, "when you have to see a body in that state."

"We don't need to, do we? I mean, to identify him?"

The DC shook her head. "We have a problem with next of kin. Who to notify. Mr Alver burned a lot of documents."

Not the jigsaw boxes, damn him! At least the house must have been locked from the inside, so suicide was the only explanation.

"Why do you suppose he would burn documents?"

"I've no idea. The Norwegian embassy may be able to help with identity and family."

"We do realize that."

"If we think of anything else," I promised, "we'll phone you right away."

Blessedly it was time for thanks for our assistance. Police are busy, and not always very bright. Fingers crossed that they didn't pop back and say "Oh, by the way..."

Hugh Ellison stayed.

"Nude picturesZ. You assured me that nothing of the sort was involvedD –"

I tried pleading, but we would not join Ellison in a heart-searching prayer. As of four weeks' time *Majig Mementoes* was evicted, banished from Eden.

Bad news number two came a fortnight later, when my period failed to arrive.

So here is another springtime, and we are still in Oak Cottage. We were forced to borrow money from both my parents and from Steve's. The arrival of a grandson prompts generosity.

James Douglas Clarke (Jamie) is named diplomatically after my own Dad and after Steve's Dad. My Mum and Dad would rather that we had married, even in a registry office. In my view money was better devoted to keeping us afloat.

Babies often stay blond and blue-eyed for quite a while. Steve hasn't dropped any hints, but surely he must recognize the resemblance to Carl Olsson, minus 30-odd years and booze-abuse. That's why he encourages that girl Caroline to help out at *Majig Mementoes*, particularly on days when I do not feel like going there with Jamie in his carry-cot – now that *Majig Mementoes* is part of the Canal Craft Centre in Blanchester, a converted warehouse, lousy location. I am not blind.

Skinny Caroline has brown dreadlocks, a dozen silver rings in her ears, one in her navel, a stud in her nose like a gleaming crystal of snot. She's one of the travelling people – not that she travels far from the tatty old narrowboat moored near the Craft Centre, shared with several kindred New Age souls, plus a baby and a mongrel. The travellers rarely range further than the Social Security office and the pubs in town.

If I had my Carl, Steve will have his Caroline, it seems. On days when I stay home, I imagine Steve hanging up the "Back in an Hour" sign at *Majig Mementoes* and consorting with Caroline on the narrowboat, assuming that the others – and the baby in a sling, and the mongrel on its length of string – are roaming the streets, trying to score some splif to smoke. Caroline lowers the tone of *Majig Mementoes*, but she

helps out usefully, for what is not much more than pocket money.

Steve must be *blind* – or banal – to have missed the main fact about my son, such a quiet and amenable baby. No sleepless nights for us, not a single one. Finance aside, there's no excuse for post-natal depression.

Here I am at home, on another afternoon of the blue-skied drought which has migrated here from Scandinavia. I know perfectly well that Steve is on the narrowboat with Caroline, sharing a splif before they peel their clothes off. Our Health Visitor, well-intentioned Mrs Wilson, has driven off in her blue Nissan Micra after weighing Jamie, filling in her chart, seeing how well this radiant Young Mum is coping. All is fine. Jamie is certainly not autistic. Flat on his back in the carry-cot he lies focusing on me precociously, while I sit alongside.

"I know you understand me," I croon at him. "I know you're Mr Frisvold. Nice Mrs Wilson won't be calling here for another month. We're on our own together, you and me. Steve doesn't really count – he isn't your Daddy, and he never bathes you. I want you to think very carefully about what I might do if you don't begin talking, Mr Frisvold – if you don't tell me the number of the Swiss account and the password. We can't afford the rent much longer.

"Tell me about Degrelle and gold and diamonds. Tell me about your gold – it's what fairy tales are all about.

"Are you to me listening, baby? Of course you are. Don't try to pretend you're only a baby. Or I might tickle you. I might tickle your foot with a lighted candle. I don't want to do that sort of thing. You have a whole life ahead of you, Mr Frisvold, I promise. After you tell me, there isn't going to be any cot-death – nothing of the sort, I swear. But you have to cooperate. Collaborate, eh, Mr Frisvold? I'm going to light a candle, just to show you. You never cried since you were born. Maybe you should have done."

I do hope he won't compel me to be a bit cruel. I don't know if I can bring myself to hurt a baby, even if its skin repairs quickly. I have bought such miniature socks from Mothercare. Today I shall merely show him the candle, maybe hold it close to the sole of his teeny-weeny foot for a little while – until he squeaks, "Stop!"

Identities may be false, history may be a lie, and my child is also a deceit. Yet I am filled with joy, awaiting baby's first word – for then life will expand like beautiful petals bursting open from a tight bud and become rich, abundant, luscious.



Ian Watson, who lives quietly with his wife Judy in a small Northamptonshire village, has written many fiercely imaginative stories for us before, ranging from "When the Timegate Failed" (IZ 14) to "Tulips from Amsterdam" (IZ 110) and "Nanunculus" (IZ 115). His latest sf novel, about a time-travelling Roman, is *Oracle* (Gollancz, September 1997, £16.99).

I felt wistfulness for a bygone Golden Age on reading Lord Abinger's judicial summing-up in *Fraser v. Berkeley*, 1836: "I really think that this assault was carried to a very inconsiderate length, and that if an author is to go and give a beating to a publisher who has offended him, two or three blows with a horse-whip ought to be quite enough to satisfy his irritated feelings."

PROFILES IN STRING

Greg Bear, speaking at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, coined a definition which I rather like: "Good hard sf is fiction that scientists consider grammatical."

Arthur C. Clarke has been credited with another major sf prophecy! 8 Mar 1965 diary entry in *The Lost Worlds of 2001*: "Fighting hard to stop Stan [Kubrick] from bringing Dr Poole back from the dead. I'm afraid his obsession with immortality has overcome his artistic instincts." Cut to 1997 and Clarke's *3001*, in which dead astronaut Frank Poole...

Richard Haigh – the one who did two Grafton horror paperbacks in the 1980s – proves to be yet another pen-name of multi-pseudonymous Laurence James.

Frederik Pohl was asked by a London TV producer to feature in a "science" programme for the BBC and US Discovery Channel. Subject: the scientific basis for ESP/psi. "When I said I didn't think there was much, she asked if I was a sceptic. When I admitted I was, she withdrew the invitation. ... I used to think of the BBC and the Discovery Channel as ornaments to television broadcasting – but that was quite a while ago."

Paul J. McAuley visited Kansas to collect the John W. Campbell memorial award for *Fairyland*, making it "three times in a row for *Interzone*-associated writers (Egan in '95; Baxter in '96)." There was some feeble struggle against the horror of the dry campus venue, but resistance was useless: "Jim Gunn, as urbane a host as you could wish, had provided beer and wine at the informal post-award party, but this was busted by the 18-year-old campus police, surely too young to know anything about Prohibition, who told us to pour away the booze. After that, we drank root beer. There was also a cheerleading summer course going on at the same time, a weird mix of an aerobics class and a Nuremberg rally. America continues to be one of the strangest places on Earth while professing total normality."

Tom Perry, long-time sf fan, critic and nice guy, died from cancer in July. He published the popular 60s/70s fanzine *Quark*, and wrote well-researched and provocative

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

essays on such fog-shrouded issues as Heinlein's early politics and Hugo Gernsback's parsimony with the truth about the 1929 bankruptcy of *Amazing Stories*.

Christopher Priest, scheduled to appear at the Edinburgh Book Festival, began to worry slightly: "I'm on a panel with two black women writers, discussing that subject to which I give so much thought and time: *Is the SAGA prize for Black British Authors racist?*" Despite hot denials, it seems increasingly likely that someone paid undue attention to Chris's 1996 win (for *The Prestige*) of the Black Memorial Prize, the one given every year by James Tait....

Gene Shoemaker of Shoemaker-Levy comet fame was killed in a July car crash in Australia. Stephen Baxter feels that his "key achievement, in the eyes of sf fans and space buffs, must be his contribution to the human exploration of the Moon." A trained geologist barred by Addison's disease from becoming the first real scientist to walk on the Moon, Shoemaker nevertheless established modern lunar geology as a science, and recruited Harrison Schmitt to take his place as the first and only scientist to visit the Moon.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Random House UK is apparently pulling entirely out of sf/fantasy (with a few blockbuster exceptions like Michael Crichton), and selling off the Legend imprint to Little, Brown. Authors with Legend contracts have mixed feelings: being published by L,B is OK, but being flogged off without any consultation as part of the Legend fixtures and fittings has made some people unhappy.

Thog's Drama Masterclass. Dave Thompson, sacked as the man inside Tinky Winky of the BBC's cult kiddie-fantasy *Teletubbies*, issued a poignant farewell statement: "I am proud of my

work for them. I was always the one to test out the limitations of the costume. I was the first to fall off my chair and roll over. I took all the risks."

Still More Awards. Nancy Kress won the Sturgeon award (best short) for "The Flowers of Aulit Prison" (*Asimov's*). Marleen Barr collected the Pilgrim Award for sf criticism at a summer SF Research Association thrash aboard the Queen Mary (now immobilized in Californian concrete); in the same ceremony, a Milford Award for achievement in sf publishing/editing went to some chap called Pringle. Our very own John Clute won a *Locus* award for his critical collection *Look at the Evidence*.

Small Press. *SF Haiku* competition – or as they call it, *SciFaiku* (oh dear): £1 entry fee per haiku, and cash prizes. SAE for details to 12 Grove-hall Ave, Leeds, LS11 7EX. Closes 30 Nov. Meanwhile, *BBR/New SF* Alliance catalogues of small press publications are again available for SAE ... PO Box 625, Sheffield, S1 3GY. Another useful guide is *Zene* (details from TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs, CB6 2LB), devoted to reviews and regular updates of submission guidelines.

Light Fingers. Sf fans accustomed to high levels of casual theft at conventions in the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, were unsurprised to hear that a miscreant was recently caught dragging home a piece of booty "bought for £30 from a man in a pub" ... being one of the hotel's colossal crystal chandeliers, valued at £15,000.

Thog's Masterclass. *Neat Tricks Dept:* "Steve sat up on his elbows." (Patrick Tilley, *The Amtrak Wars*, 1983) ... *Natural Rhythm Dept:* "But his heart was pounding and his thoughts seemed to echo the troubled rhythm: 'What now?'" (Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Forbidden Tower*, 1977) ... *Fantasy Blockbuster Special!* "Since she has died, her fragrance is everywhere." ... "She moved toward him, but he stopped her with a gnashed hiss." ... "The duke teetered between a chasm of grief and a whirlwind of rage. To control himself, he closed his eyes and turned inward. He silenced his anger by opening himself to an ocean of emptiness wider than planets." ... "The square block of her head gave a fateful nod." ... "But others delighted in his horror, especially his family's enemies, the enigmatically beautiful witch queen Thyliia from the Malpais Highlands and the wrinkled empty skin that hung from a stick and spoke with a blue tongue of flame in a shrivelled face of green fungus, the warlock Ralli-Faj." ... "Less than a day remained before dawn..." (all A. A. Attanasio, *The Dark Shore*, 1996)

He possesses one of the most prodigally inventive minds in the entire field of imaginative literature. His ideas coruscate with a surrealistic splendour, couched in a prose style that is elegant and absolutely to the point. He's possibly the finest genre writer at work in this country, with a body of work extending from one of the most striking novels in modern science fiction, *The Embedding* (1973), to his latest, a compulsive and accessible thriller with a time-travel basis, *Oracle* (Gollancz, 1997, £16.99). So one might assume that the entire community of sf aficionados would be prostrating itself before the multifoliate talents of Ian Watson – and to a large extent, it is. But there are dissenting voices. Why?

I've always been a devotee of Watson's, taking constant pleasure from the kind of brilliantly fashioned writing that those of us who despair of so much in the genre seek out with a passion. But there were times when I, too, wondered about Watson's seemingly ever-growing embrace of the transcendental and the mystical in his work. What had once functioned as a fecund source of inspiration (for a writer who clearly feels less at ease with the Benford/Baxter type of hard-science writing) looked in danger of sapping Watson's unique voice. Those who've read J. D. Salinger's or Christopher Isherwood's slim oeuvres chronologically will see the fatal worm in the bud of a growing sympathy for the mystical sapping the vitality of the marvellous early books. Would this happen to Watson?

Even before meeting Watson in a private drinking club in Soho (ideal for liberating taciturn authors' tongues – not that Watson could in a million years be accused of taciturnity), I knew that this was really a phantom fear – there was too much intelligence powering the books to allow addle-brained mysticism to attain ascendancy. But it was still worth bearding him about it – particularly as Watson's is not the kind of delicate ego that can't take a little dissent. We ordered our beers from the friendly Mike (always pleased to see authors being interviewed in his emporium), and found a quiet corner. Watson – compact, quicksilver-witted and drily aphoristic – is the perfect interview subject. As I found on this occasion.

Upwellings

from the

Oracle

Ian Watson

interviewed by

Barry Forshaw



Photo: Paul Brazier

Your new novel from Gollancz, *Oracle*, is a fast-moving and highly intelligent thriller involving, among other things, the catapulting of a Roman centurion into our era, and an encounter with IRA terrorism. As a writer known for his challenging books, why have you gone for something so accessible this time?

Well, my previous book, *Hard Questions* [1996], could also be said to be a page-turning thriller. After producing a massive and complex science-fantasy epic, *The Books of Mana* [1993-94], I wanted to go for a clean simplicity. And I was writing about quantum computers and quantum physics, which is inherently rather static – wow, did you see that electron wobble! did you see that wave function collapse! So I felt that I ought to intercut with techno-thriller action. Besides, I was thinking filmically. I learnt a lot, working with Stanley Kubrick, about narrative plotting and scene structure – the logical progression from one scene to another, totally water-tight. Stanley abhors coincidences as nature abhors a vacuum. Hmm, a reviewer of *Hard Questions* spotted a triple-whammy coincidence,

and the first review of *Oracle* that I've seen waves a penalty flag regarding coincidences even as the book gets into gear. Somebody once remarked that what other people see as coincidences I see as connections. I suspect I must have a different view of causal relationships, rather as the Navajo supposedly have a different perspective on time and causality.

I'm glad you brought Kubrick up, as you've been circumspect about your time with him in the past. But before we get on to him, let's talk about the Roman in *Oracle*, brought into our era by a time-travel experiment. He's handled with marvellous verisimilitude – fully realized as a character, despite the book's no-nonsense speed. How did you approach him?

I wanted to avoid an overload of details such as "what colour was Nero's beard?", and to move with the flow of human interest. Characterization is the thing, with the details accruing along the way. Actually, I do describe Nero's face, having scrutinized photos of old coins – which I suppose is why I mention this! – but what I mean is that I was aiming to subordinate infodump to human interaction.

All right: I know you don't want this to be an anodyne interview, so let me use that to bring up a couple of criticisms that have been levelled at you in the past. There are those who've said that while ideas may glitter in your books, this is sometimes at the expense of characterization. Personally, I feel that in *Oracle*, the ideas and characterization are as one –

Exactly my aim! Thank you! Personally, I've always felt that my char-

acters are alive, rounded and real to the extent that the mechanics of the plot allow leeway. You're right that I've been criticized in this regard. Actually, I think that this stems from literary snobbery. Since there are, *bong!*, Ideas in my books (and to that extent, they're reflections of me), I suppose it's felt that this classes the books as cerebral rather than, um, organic and visceral – a terrible thing in Britain. They're certainly not American-style hard sf, where you're explaining how to build a thorium bomb or quarry Jupiter, but they are in the psychological or social-anthropology domain, with characters portraying notions. For me whenever an idea arises, a character starts to form rather like a homunculus in a jar, representing and explicating that idea. I try to make the characters interact in an interesting and believable fashion, and I'm increasingly aiming at character-propelled fiction.

But surely you're hoist by your own petard. Nobody would ever look at an Arthur C. Clarke novel and say "what a shame the characterization's so rudimentary." We know that with Clarke he's not primarily interested in character, and never really has been – the concepts are all. But because you write books which can be judged from what one could call a literary standpoint, then you're setting yourself up for criticism if the characters are inclined to the functional.

Oh dear, I'm like a ten-ball juggler. If one of the balls goes wonky, fingers point. "Ah! did you see that?"

Isn't this the eternal problem with science fiction? You do have to spend quite a bit of time establishing the rules and mores of a society or planet, while non-genre writers can merely sketch in, say, city life – that's less of a problem for them.

But that's why science fiction is so exciting for me – it is more of a juggling act, and if I start out to write something which is mainstream, it mutates so rapidly that I may as well have started out to write an sf story to begin with.

How do you feel about the fact that the serious newspapers – the broadsheets – treat sf and fantasy with utter disdain, barely reviewing it?

That's a real shame, because about 15 or 20 years ago, science fiction was routinely being covered in all the quality newspapers, and in magazines such as *The Spectator*. I don't really know what happened: perhaps the intellectual sensibility of mainstream literary culture has narrowed down rather than opened up.

Could it be to do with the fact that whatever people found exciting about science fiction has now been sub-

sumed into the mainstream? And, of course, the "dumbing down" of large areas of sf can't have helped, can it?

Ah, we all know that the film *Star Wars* did an enormous amount of harm in this dumbing-down process. When that movie came out, many people said "Whoopie! Science fiction has taken over the world!" Well, it hadn't, of course – just a kiddified version of science fiction. The era of intellectual excitement encapsulated by 2001 can't really be recaptured. To many writers entering the field now, the history of the genre is unknown, because the seminal books are unavailable, out of print, vanished. We're dealing with clones of clones. People re-invent the wheel. They re-hash without even realizing. And many more people are doing so than ever before, with great technical finesse but not really challenging new conceptual frontiers. There's just too much product about, basically. There isn't the urgency to read a new book, which 30 years ago would have been an oasis in a desert. Now there are swimming pools all over the place to dip in, but there isn't the will to slake thirst urgently, which was the case once upon a time.

Well, re-hashing is something you've never done: your most vitriolic critic couldn't accuse you of that. Or have you ever re-cycled anything?

You mean other people's stuff? A lot has soaked in, and it's there in the aquarium of the mind. Nutrient in the hydroponic garden. Hopefully not in any obtrusive way. Of course there are a lot of allusions. I even put a disguised quote from Baudelaire into one of my "Warhammer" novels, which nobody noticed – not that I intended anybody to particularly. *Tu m'a donné ta boue, et j'en ai fait de l'or*. You gave me your mud and I turned it into gold. Ho ho.

You've imported the epic Finnish myth The Kalevala into fantasy, which, to my knowledge, is an area that hasn't been explored before. Sibeliuss set this to music, of course – is music a part of your creative process?

Actually, Emil Petaja wrote several little space operas for Ace Books in the 1960s based on *The Kalevala*, but I only realized this half way through writing the first *Mana* book. Surge of panic. But reading one of them reassured me that I was doing something quite different with the material. Doing something different – or what I suppose is different – does matter to me, though there are thematic continuities, and sometimes things come in threes – for instance, my horror foray with *The Power* and *Meat* leading up to *The Fire Worm*. And the book I'm writing right now is a kind of thematic successor to *Hard Questions* and *Oracle*, after which I will presumably veer elsewhere.

Anyway, from space opera back to grand opera. I listened to a lot of music during formative years at school – we were all crazy about Wagner then. We would have a pint of Newcastle Brown Ale and a saveloy, than go home and put on *The Ring* or *The Mastersingers*. But as for references in my books to any of the arts – well, they're just part of the texture. Not decoration ... something else. Part of the weave of me. It's not essential to spot such things.

I said earlier that I'd confront you with some of the criticisms levelled at you, and I'm not letting you off the hook. You've called yourself a mystical rationalist, and transcendental and metaphysical themes assumed greater and greater importance in your work, which worries me... and I know I'm not alone.

Is there a group of people out there saying "I'm rather worried about Ian Watson?" A sort of Taliban. Did you know that Taliban is the Afghan word for a "study group"?

No, no – but look at Huxley. As his belief in mysticism grew, his novels diminished in ambition and stature. Your use of these elements is, of course, skilfully dovetailed to the service of the books, but the mystical did assume very large proportions in your work.

And unduly so, you think? Are you saying where's Ian Watson in regard to all this? Am I a trickster and do I have any fundamental belief structure? Well, I espouse the method-actor theory of writing, in as much as I propel myself into a particular belief structure for a particular book. There's a constant theme all the way through my career about structures of perception and consciousness – but I hope there's also a lot of humour in my books. The trouble is, if a writer mixes jokes and heavy metaphysics, readers get uneasy. Are the metaphysics serious? Are the jokes funny? But, yes, I do have an ironic outlook.

Well, a book like The Gardens of Delight utilized mythic elements in a playful way, without being overtly playful. I sense that you're in no way an unequivocal believer in any one religious philosophy?

Oh, if you adopt any one belief system unequivocally, then you've gone over the edge into what I would call the realm of the illusory. You've seized upon a crutch to cope with the fear of death or whatever. Does this make me a dilettante rather than a Dante? *A propos* this, Colin Wilson got in touch with me out of the blue just recently. He's writing a book about the UFO mythos and he had discovered my *Miracle Visitors*. He wanted to know why I had lost interest in UFOs and written nothing more about them. (Maybe I should have carried on and founded a quasi-religion as Whitley Strieber seems set on doing, with

UFO wisdom in place of El Ron's engrams and e-meters!) But the truth is that having "resolved" that book I couldn't re-hash the same domain.

When you started to use these elements in your work, there wasn't the kind of cynicism about what we'd now identify as the "New Age," right?

But back then it was new and exciting. You know, Castaneda mattered. Just as science fiction has always been surrounded by elements of schlock, so anything concerning transcendental consciousness and altered states has often had a dose of the saccharine and phoney. I've always used a rational outlook concerning the physics aspect of sf – what stars and planets consist of, or how evolution operates. So I feel I have the less rational elements in the correct balance.

Actually, though, is it true to say that mystical themes are looming larger and larger? *Oracle* has no mysticism that I can think of, other than a trip to see the Sibyl at Cumae, which Marcus regards cynically, and which is part of his background. *Hard Questions* has stuff about life-after-death, but in a science-fictional manner: where do you store all the data? My Navajo bikers have a dream-catcher web, but that's part of their cultural mind-set. My cult leader who believes in soul-empowerment through screwing is a charismatic nut-case. I just happen to empathize strongly with characters who are not normal, or necessarily nice, as much as with the people you would normally identify with. Also, I would call the *Mana* books mythological rather than mystical, with more accent on narrative than numinous values. A recent short story such as "The Great Escape" in *Dante's Disciples*, set in Hell, is gonzo rather than Goddy. What I really mean by "mystical rationalist" is that I have a fundamentally rational approach (when I'm not being surreal) but that I'm interested in a whole slew of alternative mind-views as well as mainline science, though without any desire to burn joss sticks or talk to trees. (Mine's a pint.) This seems reasonable: many consciousness researchers keep an open mind about "mystical disciplines" as well as hot-wiring neurons.

You mentioned earlier that there was too much product around – surely that's always been true?

I don't think so: it's increasing. It's true of all genres of books – you only have to look at any field of interest, and you'll find ten times as many books on the subject. The Nazi party

in the 1930s, theology, Islamic tile patterns, whatever ... every single field. Of course, all this is a danger for a writer such as myself: publishers are hunting for fresh doughnuts. The new breakthrough name – who's not really breakthrough at all... Oh, bollocks, this sounds like sour grapes. I'll start again. It's much better that the world is so full of superfluity and richness. Why should you have to spend days searching for that book on Islamic tile patterns?

You were hungry for knowledge in your younger days...

Of course! But now people do have

a short attention span – and I suppose some might think *Oracle*, being user-friendly, is a concession to this. These people you said were worried about my mysticism – now they can worry about me compromising. I'm one of those writers who, uniquely, can't win – and this is possibly because the people who are interested in my stuff have a fairly passionate attachment to it. I suppose I do influence

some people – this is why I write. To influence peoples' minds – the kind of fan mail I receive is from those who are passionately interested in things, and want to know where they go from then onwards.

How do you see your relationship to your readers?

I have jolly drinks with some of them. And I've had the odd Fan from Hell – but we won't go into him. Usually it's wonderful to find that you have affected people, and to be affected in turn by them. My readership seems to have changed since *The Embedding*, but then so have I. I used to compile card indexes for the earlier books, but they grow more organically now. I let things move in a more spontaneous way. The origins of my books can come from anywhere. Take the genesis of *Oracle*. I drive around the Northamptonshire countryside quite a lot. For some while, goodness knows why, I had been wondering, "What if I happened to see a Roman

soldier – a Centurion?" What would I do? Stop for him, of course – then how would you talk to him? It all flowed from there. I've seen llamas and a wolf hybrid, so why not a Roman?

But your ideas in general, they do come thick and fast. And I find myself thinking of – well, not other writers, but the Surrealists: Magritte, Tanguy. Do you see yourself as a surrealist?

Conceivably, sf is a form of surrealism, or at least mine is. I could marshal the following arguments: the surrealist idea was to take us out of mundane reality into other worlds. It also contained a parody of scientific methodology and even scientific machinery, the whole idea being to shake up human consciousness. Ballard, of course, has been batting this idea around for years as regards sf and the aesthetic of surrealism. I do have other quite contrary influences – Zola, for instance, with his great sociological-heredity thought-experiment presented so splendidly luridly. He's the pulp sf writer of 19th-century France – sort of.

Is science fiction socially relevant today?

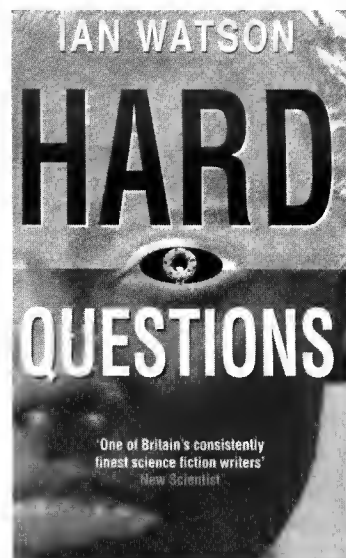
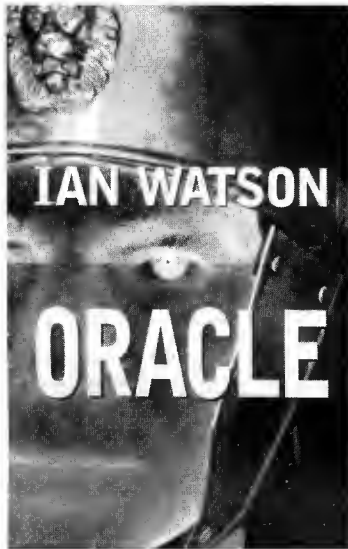
It's imaginatively relevant. In many respects, it's still politically relevant. SF writers are predictors of the alternative, multiple pathways of the future. Of course you have to be socially responsible. I use the Irish Troubles as an element in *Oracle*, and this gave me some qualms. A lot of what I put in that book – written a year ago – is about to come on-line. The Continuity Army Council – oh, I shouldn't go too far into that; it would be imprudent of me. Rather, let's say that the Ulster and Roman material meshed for what were to me compelling narrative reasons, though

at the same time there was a sense of urgent relevance.

How is your relationship with your publisher and your editor – or can't you answer that?

My editor, Jo Fletcher, provided quite a bit of nifty input for *Oracle* after I sent the book in, for instance making sure that I got the finer points of investigative breaking-and-entering right – she has a wonderful eye for detail. Also it turned out she's fluent in Latin: she used to write letters to her father in

Latin. (Is this a coincidence, eh?) At a time of increasing grumbles about editors failing to do any editing, this is impeccable professionalism.



Back to Stanley Kubrick. You've been a little close-mouthed about working with him – even to the extent of not saying whether or not the association is at an end. But perhaps you'll tell me if you feel you might become one of the shrivelled husks, cast aside by Kubrick, when he's drained your ideas?

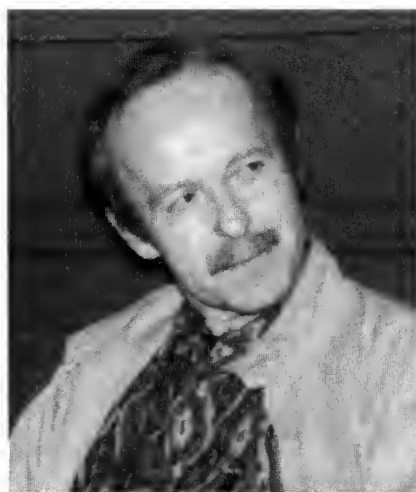
You have to resolutely sustain your identity. Otherwise he'll take over – as in Jerome Bixby's "It's a Good Life," the omnipotent-child story. He controls – but you can control back. A sense of surrealism helps, and not obsessing about the money involved. I remember one typical story-conference. There we were in the kitchen, sunny September lunchtime, when I spied a bee on the floor. "There's a bee on the floor," I observed. "Will it sting me?" Stanley asked in panic. "It looks a bit sick," I reassured him, and rose to inspect the prostrate bee. "Sit down," ordered Stanley. "Don't kill it!" – because he knew that supporters of Tony Benn would stamp remorselessly on bees. With great courage Stanley took a crystal bowl and table-mat or whatever and manoeuvred the bee under the inverted dome. "Stay here," he ordered, "and don't follow me!" So I got on watching CNN. After five minutes Stanley returned proudly. "I found a place for the bee in the herb garden." An imp of the perverse possessed me. "It'll be frosty tonight," I predicted. "Do you mean the bee might die? Now you've made me guilty!" He sallied out again. Time passed, but after searching he found the bee, and back it came, sprawling under the crystal dome. "What do you think bees eat, Ian?" "Er, honey," I hazarded. So we commenced a search for honey and presently a volcano-like dollop was beside the bee. But where in the 48 rooms could we best put it for the coming winter...?

I feel fond of Stanley. My brains only turned into scrambled eggs a couple of times. But you have to keep possession of yourself. Since Stanley is secretive to the point of paranoia, and Kubrick HQ is expert at disinformation rumours, I haven't the foggiest whether the movie being made now – *Eyes Wide Shut* – has any connection with what I was working on, though I strongly doubt it. On the other hand, if Tom Cruise turns out to be playing a robot gigolo... Enough said.

His studio seems to give him endless leeway – it doesn't matter how long the films take...

Warner told me they want another film out of him before he pops his clogs. Kubrick films are good earners in the long run if not immediately, so Warner would humour him for years. Besides which, Stanley is pretty unique among directors in the degree of control he has.

What's your view of the standard multi-volume fantasy sequence – par-



Ian Watson, one of the judges, at the Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony in May 1997.

ticularly as you've written one of the most unusual yourself?

You can spread out, and, plot-wise, develop things in a more multi-linear way that might not have been possible otherwise. I did try to avoid the standard *lingua franca* of fantasy sagas; and I had no publisher-pressure to make it more "marketable." Richard Evans, my late editor, bless his memory, said that it didn't need editing. Really, the two *Books of Mana* are one big novel, too big to print in one volume, and conceived as such. I'm not inherently averse to sequences of books – they're as good or as bad as whoever is writing them, though after about number four rot usually sets in. No, actually I think I am becoming allergic to them, like developing hay-fever later in life. My eyes water as I scan forthcoming titles.

I believe that when you were at Finland's first Midwinter SF Convention, some things happened worthy of an Ian Watson novel. Care to enlighten me?

I was invited to Tampere, the Manchester of Finland, as a result of *Lucky's Harvest*. Leena Peltonen wanted to improve the standard of cuisine in volume two, so she took a trip to the old farm to fetch colostrum for a pudding. (That's the first immuno-rich milk-flow from a cow after giving birth.) Safeguarded by colostrum, we went off to a pub where people were determined that I should try the new vogue drink, *salmiaki* I think it's called, a mixture of aniseed, liquorice and ammonium chloride. "This will give you the four-day hangover," my hosts boasted as inducement. Just as well I only had one glass, and poured lots of beer down to dilute it, because as I was attempting to leave at two in the morning to slide back through the ice-glassy streets to the hotel, a couple of rather tipsy middle-aged Finns buttonholed me. They recognized me from my photo in the morning newspaper which is called *Aamulehti*. (Rather

like omelette, good name for a read at breakfast time.) "Meester Watson," they cried, "you love our national epic. We drive you now to our hut in the forest for sauna and sausages. And" – irresistible offer – "we will cut a hole in the ice of the lake for you!" More ammonium chloride, and I might have agreed.

If you're going to continue to be one of the writers in the field we read as a matter of course, what's your strategy for freshening the brew? You talk about the superfluity of product – even those of us who always trust you to astonish us have a lot of other books and writers vying for our attention. Why should we go on reading Ian Watson, apart from ensuring your royalty payments keep flowing merrily in?

For illuminations? For coincidences revealing hidden patterns at work (and at play)? For nifty characters in nimble narratives? Am I really the best person to answer this question?

Tell me about the book you're writing at the moment. And the story for Interzone, "Secrets."

"Secrets" emerged from a trip to Oslo last year as a guest of honour, and I'm hoping that the Norwegian fans who invited me won't take it amiss! I think I may be on slightly touchy territory. A Norwegian fish billionaire, who also owns most of Wimbledon FC, recently got into big trouble for planning a *de luxe* million-quid summer cottage on an island in Oslo Fjord instead of a spartan back-to-nature one. He had to retract publicly, saying that he didn't want to mess with the soul of the Norwegian people. I feel qualms along these lines, but "Secrets" is the story which upwelled, and it touches on the true history of Quisling, whose name is synonymous with "slimy traitor" but who was actually one of the great humanitarian figures of the century – only history has been rewritten.

"Secrets" is going to be the prologue to the novel I'm busy on right now, called *Mockymen*, which takes place around 2015, set in England. It's about reincarnation, mind-couriers, enigmatic aliens who may have a hidden agenda, and questions of identity. Some of it is due to appear in rather different form as a story called "Scars" in George Zebrowski's *Synergy*, supposedly due from White Wolf before Christmas 1997. Again a strange fusion has taken place – between Norway past and present, and a future where the minds of aliens occupy "dummy" human bodies. And a character has unexpectedly and spontaneously taken over the bulk of the book – a highly manipulative woman spook, the flip-side of my dealings with security matters in *Oracle*. Bully for her. She might save the world.

Jerome had supper waiting by the time his five-year-old son, Matthew, arrived home from work. "What's on?" asked Matthew as he stepped into the tiny apartment. The light pseudo-gravity gave his steps an incongruously youthful bounce.

"Algae base B and D with beef culture, prepared in neo-French mode," Jerome replied, he enjoyed cooking.

Sadly, Matthew seemed to have no particular interest in it.

Hilary had loved his cooking. But Hilary was long gone. Sometimes, Jerome found himself wishing she hadn't left. But she had, and all he was left with was the pain of her memory.

But at least, he thought, it was real memory.

Jerome watched in silence as Matthew shed his work devices, carefully locking them into separate cases. Then he moved around the apartment, performing minor straightenings. Matthew was meticulous.

When he finished, he sat at the table and began to eat. After a moment, Jerome joined him.

"So," Jerome asked, "how was your day?"

"A waste of time," replied Matthew, speaking between measured bites, "we had a series of pipelines up from Earth, but the data was hopelessly corrupted. We couldn't do anything with it, so in the end we had to requisition new beams."

"Oh."

"The comptrollers were mad as hell. It seems they had a budget line for data reconstruction, but their allocation for replacement feeds was used up. It took us most of the day to convince them that we couldn't fix this load and that they'd have to find the money somehow."

"Uh huh."

"Bureaucrats." Matthew made a face.

Jerome picked at his food, watching Matthew eat with indifferent haste. Food didn't matter to Matthew. He took time out to consume, and then moved on.

"I thought it would be good for us to eat together," Jerome said, "you know. With the way our schedules conflict, we don't really see much of each other sometimes. And you're still a juvenile, there are regs..."

"Yes, I've been studying them. Did you know that between twelve and seventeen I'll have fewer rights than I do now? Something to do with hormonal development at that stage. Isn't that insane?"

"I guess so," Jerome replied. He watched the old man in his son's young body.

"What I find that I notice now, though, are the gaps."

"Gaps?" Jerome asked.

"Developmental stages," Matthew explained, "in the old days children would go through a series of developmental stages, where perceptions and reasoning abilities were different in kind and in quality from one level to another. Such as making sense of 3-D and 2-D images."

"I didn't think that would bother you."

"The stages, the built in limitations, are partly biological, partly the wiring development of the physical structure of the brain. They're still there. With writing, you can build bridges over them. But every now and then, you find a gap filled in beyond the software bridge. That's when you realize it was there. You discover that you have broader insights."

"Oh," said Jerome.

Write me

D. G. Valdron

"I've talked to others in my age group, it's a common experience."

"They said your personality would evolve," Jerome offered. From day one, they had told him, Matthew would evolve, until ultimately, he would be, more or less, who he would have been anyway.

They lied, Jerome thought bitterly. Nobody could know that.

"Who?" Matthew asked.

"The Overwriters," Jerome replied.

The conversation staggered to a halt for a few moments. They ate quietly.

"I was reading this article," Jerome ventured, "about new advances in writing. It seems they're having some success writing partial programs on criminals."

A criminal, Jerome reflected angrily, was anyone considered to be socially maladapted and therefore subject to reduced civil rights in comparison to their age and social group. Incorrigibles were liable to be dumped and written over. So were suicides, but suicides would not be amenable to partial writes.

"It's not my field, but I doubt it," Matthew replied, "you can't avoid overwriting. It's like a computer program saved on disk. It's holographic, it won't work with a piece missing here and a piece missing there. If you write a new program onto the disk, and it doesn't identify the old one, it'll write itself over parts of the old program, and then you have junk."

"That's why," he looked up, "sometimes when you lose a file in your computer system, you can sometimes get it back. The computer hasn't erased it, it's just 'forgotten' to recognize it. You can get it back, by having the computer recognize it again."

"That's also why, if you want it back, you can't enter anything else until you have it. If the computer doesn't recognize the program, it'll write over it as if it wasn't there," Matthew concluded, "and then it's destroyed."

"So all they have to do is learn to recognize the human coding..." Jerome speculated.

"Human coding is wired differently, it's whole brain organization. Global or integrated; not modular like

computers. There's no way to avoid overwriting."

"But they have had some successes," Jerome insisted.

"As I understand it," replied Matthew drawing on professional expertise, "they've been trying to overwrite so as to limit the damage. They still wind up with badly dysfunctional personalities."

"But," Matthew continued, "I'd say the biggest obstacle is in the complete incompatibility of the original and new programs. They simply don't integrate."

"Oh," said Jerome.

Jerome stopped eating, and simply watched Matthew.

He looked like Hilary, Jerome decided for the thousandth time. He had her eyes, and traces of her face. Perhaps it was guilt that made him think that. It seemed that nothing else of theirs was in the boy.

"Matthew?"

The child stopped and looked up, grave eyes measuring, "What?"

"Do you ever miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"Being a real child?"

"I am a real child. I've certainly got enough restrictions on my civil rights."

"You know what I mean. Does it ever bother you, having a written personality? Are you missing something?"

Jerome suddenly flashed back to the Writingday, as it had come to be called. He and Hilary had taken the grinning burbling toddler into the centre. Had watched as the technicians took him away. When Matthew returned, Hilary had been gone. A technician had introduced him to his son.

The two of them had formally shaken hands.

"You mean do I miss squalling and bedwetting? Do I feel somehow deprived in losing the opportunity to go stumbling along at a snail's pace, being immature unformed clay, a grasping well of helpless needs, a half person living a mock life?" Matthew asked rhetorically.

"No, I don't think so," he concluded.

"Besides," Matthew started again, "this isn't earth, where oxygen is free and water falls from the sky. Everything has a cost here, even breathing. We simply can't afford to coddle our members for twenty-five years until they become mature adults and learn useful skills. Members of our society have to pull their own weight as soon as possible."

The party line, thought Jerome, they wrote the party line into him.

"I want a divorce."

Jerome said it softly but clearly.

There was a moment of tense and arching silence, Matthew simply looked at him.

"As a legal juvenile, I have primary rights to the family domicile," he said.

"I know," Jerome answered, "I've found alternate accommodations."

"You're leaving." The child's lip began to tremble. Jerome felt a stabbing pain in his heart, but steeled himself against the sensation. A trick of the writing, he told himself.

"Yes. There really is no point in going on," Jerome said.

"Why?" Matthew asked, almost plaintively.

"You're not my son," Jerome explained.

"I am! I am too your son!" Matthew burst out.

Beneath the table he wrung his tiny hands together. It was an old man's gesture, not a child's. There was nothing of the child in Matthew, it seemed to Jerome.

"My son is gone, you're just a generic personality that's replaced him. You're a ghost from the machines, and someone else's ghost as well."

You couldn't electronically insert information into the human mind without damaging it. The obvious solution had been to destroy the mind, erase it completely, and insert a new personality along with the information.

So brutally, callously obvious, thought Jerome.

Matthew had been gone. Whoever, whatever Matthew might have become had been gone since the technician had stepped through the door with him.

Jerome suddenly experienced a flush of relief, he felt free. Freed from pretending, free to grieve for his lost son, free from the cautious dance with this stranger.

You'll grow to love him, they said, and he'll love you. The divorce rates exposed that lie. Bonds in that unforgiving land of family and strangers, he realized, eventually became unbearable.

"Write yourself," Matthew snapped angrily. "You made me this way. You decided to write me. It wasn't my choice. You and Mom could have chosen not to."

Guilt stabbed at Jerome. It was the first time he'd ever heard Matthew refer to Hilary.

She'd wanted to waive overwriting.

But Jerome hadn't agreed. They couldn't afford the lifetime taxes, and fees, and surcharges, he'd told her. Besides, he'd said, no one else did it anymore. He'd not had the courage to buck the wave of social pressure, or suffer the penalties.

"I don't think that this is helping," he told Matthew. "I'm going now. Under the regs you can have the next four days to yourself, or you can call Family Services and requisition an interim parent."

Jerome got up and walked to the Portal. He didn't bother looking around the sterile grey quarters. Nothing here felt like it was his.

"Don't go," Matthew called.

Jerome hesitated. He turned back at the portal, as it slid open.

"You can start interviewing replacement parentals... I think... it would be better with someone who didn't know you from before." He looked down.

"I'll keep in touch."

Then he was gone, the portal swished shut quietly to mark his absence.

Matthew sat alone at the table. He stared at his small hands, watching them curl into fists again and again.

"Write me," he whispered.

Dennis Valdron lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and has written many small-press short stories; on the very day we accepted the above piece by e-mail he told us that he had just received two other acceptances, "an e-mail from *Northwords*, a Canadian sf 'zine, accepting a short story called 'The Monkey Sea,' and this morning a letter from *Strange Wonderland*, a Canadian fantasy 'zine, accepting a story called 'The Fierce Godmother.' What a day!"

“Immoral,” huffed Morgause.

As I knew she would. After thirty years under a common roof, you might speak someone's thoughts for them, if you dared. Even when she first came to Camelot as a widow of 24, with four sons, Morgause was a prig. “He should have known who we *are*!”

“Young cocks don't display their colours to old hens,” I said. “I doubt he even noticed us. Too many pretty young things. You must admit we make pretty granddaughters, we three.”

“Gwen, *really*. You can't possibly approve. Witchcraft, incest, adultery...”

“There, there, dear,” Morgan said. “Who wants songs of old age: chilblains, knotted joints, bald heads, bald gums.” She had it in her to add “double chins,” I could see, but mercifully heeded my warning look. “The young don't want to know, and their elders know all too well.”

“That's the kind of thing you *would* say,” Morgause said. “I wouldn't put it past you to have *suggested* parts of it. I used to see you coming in at dawn, your hair all wet with the May dew. You almost caught your death of cold.”

“Could have been worse,” I said, unwisely.

“And what,” Morgan said, innocently, “Could be worse?”

“Rape,” Morgause said, chillingly. Chivalry in song was one thing. Chivalry in practice another. Years of weeping servant girls (and the occasional boy, the Romans not being so very long ago) taught us all that.

Morgan shook her head sadly at Morgause, but her eyes were wicked. “I always did have the hots for Arthur. And there's my reputation ruined without the pleasure of the ruining.”

“Morgan!”

“I never knew him as my brother, did I, shut up on that island with a mess of women all those years? I never met him until I was twenty, and married” – she shuddered pointedly – “to Lot of Orkney. Oh, the sorrows of princesses. I wish those *had* been the kind of spells they taught at Avalon.”

“You,” Morgause said, “are an immoral pagan.”

“Oh no,” Morgan said. “They threw me out.”

I often did wonder what happened there. I never did believe the black entrails, lightening strikes, breaking branches, etcetera, which supposedly interrupted her initiation. The mushroom stew served up to the other novices rings truer, since I have my suspicions about the vision of the Grail. Morgan was being uncommonly helpful in the kitchen around then. Still, it had its uses. Kept the men occupied.

“What would *he* have thought?” Morgause huffed. Since Arthur was no longer alive to offend her with his far from immaculate self, she could drape him in sanctity with impunity.

“Sleeping forever on an isle of women,” Morgan said, fanning the flames. “He'd have liked that.”

“He,” I said, “would have insisted that the chilblains and the stiff joints be included. He was above all a realist. He would then have refused to listen to anything without. He did not like old age; he would have much preferred to die on the battlefield. I cannot say I blame him. Isn't there a draft, or is it my age?”

“It's upset you,” Morgause said. “That bard should

The Bardic Version

Alison Sinclair

have known who we were!”

“I dare say someone will tell him,” Morgan remarked. “And the poor boy will be mortified. But where's the harm? Our men are part of the legends now, and he's given three old dowagers something to talk about over their weaving besides their aches and pains and how the summers used to be warmer and wool brighter and the men so much more manly.”

“Legends! What about the High King himself. Your son painted as a treacherous bastard of incest!”

“And do you really think anyone who ever met Modred would believe it for moment that he had anything of Arthur in him. Who'd have thought I could have bred such a straightlaced, po-faced, stuffed shirt of a son. If I hadn't given birth to him myself, I'd have thought I had a cuckoo in the nest! Maybe the cradles did get switched.”

Morgause gave up on her, and turned on me, “Casting you as an *adulteress* –”

“– and with *Lancelot*, of all people,” Morgan added. “You must admit, it's not the adultery that's the insult, it's who it's with. Half-cracked, even at his best. Running mad in the woods. Worse than Merlin, and Merlin was bad enough.”

I said nothing.

The priests objected when Ursula and Modred announced their intention to marry. They presumed them too close in blood, she being the only child I had ever conceived, and he, Arthur's nephew. To the knights and chieftains it had a means of strengthening the Royal bloodline, and Modred's claim as heir, of preserving Arthur's line and Arthur's peace. Besides, if the priests said nay, on principle they must say yea. Arthur sat still in the high seat and let the arguments wash about him.

When he was dying, Arthur said to me, “I knew. I have always known.” He said he had long forgiven me, and he was a realist: the Royal line and the Royal peace must be preserved. And all those years I had thought myself the deceiver, I was myself deceived. And all those years, he did it so tenderly.

I said, “It's just a story. Next winter there will be yet another version.”

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Quin's

SHANGHAI CIRCUS

Jeff VanderMeer

"Me, I was at the height of my powers..."
– Giant Sand

Let me tell you why I wished to buy a meerkat at Quin's Shanghai Circus. Let me tell you about the city: *The city is sharp, the city is a cliché performed with cardboard and painted sparkly colours to disguise the empty centre – the hole.*

(That's mine – *the words*. I specialize in holo art, but every once in a chemical moon I'll do the slang jockey thing on paper.)

Let me tell you what the city means to me. So you'll understand about the meerkat, because it's important. Very important: back a decade, when the social planners ruled, we called it Dayton Central. Then, when the central government choked flat and the police all went freelance, we started calling it Veniss – like an adder's hiss, deadly and unpredictable. Art was Dead here until Veniss. Art before Veniss was just Whore Hole stuff, street mimes with flexi-faces and *flat media*.

That's what the Social Revolutions meant to me – not all the redrum riots and the twisted girders and the flourishing free trade markets and the hundred-metre-high ad signs sprouting on every street corner. Not the garbage zones, not the ocean junks, not the underlevel coups, nor even the smell of glandular drugs, musty yet sharp. No, Veniss brought Old Art to an end, made me dream of *suck-cess*, with my omni-present, omni-everything holovision.

Almost brought *me* to an end as well one day, for in the absence of those policing elements of society (except for pay-for-hire), two malicious thieves – nay, call them what they were: Pick Dicks – well, these two pick dicks stole all my old-style ceramics and new style holosculpture and, after mashing me on the head with a force that split my brains all over the floor, split too. Even my friend Shadrach Begolem showed concern when he found me. (A brooding sort, my friend Begolem: no blinks: no twitches: no ties. All economy of motion, of energy, of time. Eyyy, the opposite of me.) But we managed to rouse an autodoc from its wetwork slumber and got me patched up (Boy, did that hurt!).

Afterwards, I sat alone in my apartment/studio, crying as I watched nuevo westerns on a holo Shadrach lent me. All that work gone! The faces of the city, the scenes of the city, that had torn their way from my mind to the holo, forever lost – never even shown at a galleria, and not likely to have been, either. Veniss, huh! The adder defanged. The snake slithering away. When did anyone

care about the real artists until after they were dead? And I was as close to Dead as any Living Artist ever was. I had no supplies. My money had all run out on me – plastic rats deserting a paper ship. I was a Goner, all those Artistic Dreams so many arthritic flickers in a holoscreen.

I think I always had Artistic Dreams.

When we were little, my twinned sister Nicola and I made up these fabric creatures we called cold pricklies and, to balance the equation, some warm fuzzies. All through the sizzling summers of ozone rings and water conservation and baking metal, we'd be indoors with our make-believe world of sharp-hard edges and diffuse-soft curves, for slaking the thirst of veldt and jungle on the video monitors.

We were both into the Living Art then – the art you can touch and squeeze and hold to your chest, not the dead, flat-screen scrawled stuff. Pseudo-Mom and Pseudo-Dad thought us wonky, but that was okay, because we'd always do our chores, and because later we found out they weren't our real parents. Besides, we had true morals, true integrity. We knew who was evil and who was good. The warm fuzzies always won out in the end.

Later, we moved on to genetic playdoh, child gods creating creatures that moved, breathed, required attention for their mewling, crying tongues. Creatures we could destroy if it suited our temperament. Not that any of them lived very long.

My sister moved away from the Living Art when she got older, just as she moved away from me. She processes the free market now.

So, since Shadrach certainly wouldn't move in to protect me and my art from the cold pricklies of destruction – I mean, I couldn't go it alone; I had this horrible vision of sacrificing my ceramics, throwing them at future Pick Dicks because the holo stuff wouldn't do any harm of a *physical nature* (which made me think, hey, maybe this holo stuff is Dead Art, too, if it doesn't impact on the world when you throw it) – since that was Dead Idea, I was determined to go down to Quin's Shanghai Circus (wherever *that* was) and "git me a meerkat," as those hokey nuevo westerns say. A meerkat for me, I'd say, tall as you please. Make it a double. In a dirty glass cage. (Oh, I'd crack myself up if the Pick Dicks hadn't already. Tricky, tricky pick dicks.)

But you're probably asking how a Living Artist such as myself – a gaunt, relatively unknown, and alone artiste – could pull the strings and yank the chains that get you an audience with the mysterious Quin.

Well, I admit to connections. I admit to Shadrach. I admit to tracking Shadrach down in the Canal District.

Canal District – Shadrach. They go together, like *Volodya* and *Sirin*, like Ozzie and Hardy, Romeo and Juliard. You could probably find Shadrach down there now, though I hardly see him any more on account of my sister Nicola. That's how I met Shadrach, through Nicola when they shared an apartment.

You see, Shadrach lived below-level for his first 25 years, and when he came up he came up in the Canal District. "A wall of light," he called it, and framed against this light, my sister Nicola, who served as an

orientation officer back then for peoples coming above ground. A wall of light and my sweet sister Nicola, and Shadrach ate them both up. Imagine: living in a world of darkness and neon for all of your life and coming to the surface and there she is, an angel dressed in white to guide you, to comfort you, to love you. If you had time, I'd tell you about them, because it was a thing to covet, their love, a thing of beauty to mock the cosmetics ads and the lingerie holos...

Anyway, ever since the space freighters stopped their old splash 'n' crash in the cool down canals, the Canal District has been the hippest place in town. Go there sometime and think of me, because I don't think I'll be going there again. Half the shops float on the water, so when the ocean-going ships come in with their catch and off-load after decon, the eateries get the first pick. All the Biggest Wigs eat there. You can order pseudo-whale, fiddler, sunfish, the works. Most places overlook the water and you can find *anything* there – mechanicals and Living Art and sensual pleasures that will leave you quivering and unconscious. All done up in a pallet of Colours-Sure-to-Please. Sunsets courtesy of Holo Ink, so you don't have to see the glow of pollution, the haze of smog-shit-muck. Whenever I was down, there I would go, just to sit and watch the Giants of Bioindustry and the Arts walk by, sipping from their carafes of alkie (which I don't envy them, rot-gut seaweed never having been a favourite of mine).

And so I was down, real down (more down than now, sitting in a garbage zone and speling to you), and I wanted a talk with Shadrach because I knew he worked for Quin and he might relent, relinquish and *tell me* what I wanted to know.

It so happened that I nonchalantly bumped into Shadrach in a quiet corner, away from the carousing and watchful eye of the Canal Police, who are experts at keeping Order, but can never decide exactly *which* Order, if you know what I mean, and you probably don't.

We still weren't alone, though – parts merchants and debauched jewelleried concierge wives and stodgy autodocs, gleaming with a hint of self-repair, all sped or sauntered by, each self-absorbed, self-absorbing.

Shadrach played it cool, cooler, coolest, listening to the sea beyond, visible from crack in our tall falling walls.

"Hi," I said. "Haven't seen you since those lousy pick dicks did their evil work. You saved my skin, you did."

"Hello, Nick," Shadrach replied, looking out at the canals.

"Hello, Nick," he says, after all the compli- and condi-ments I'd given him!)

Shadrach is a thin, muscular man, of medium height. A tan. A flattened nose from his days as courier between city states – the funny people gave him that – and a dour mouth. His clothes are all out of date, his sandals positively reeking of antiquity. Still thinks he's a 27th-Century Man, if you know what I mean, and, again, you probably don't. (After all, you *are* sitting here in a garbage zone with me.)

"So how're things with you?" I said, anticipating that I'd have to drag him kicking and screaming to my point.

"Fine," he said. "You look bad, though." No smile.

I suppose I did look bad. I suppose I must have, still bandaged up and a swell on my head that a geosurfer would want to ride.

"Thanks," I said, wondering why all my words, once smartly deployed for battle, had left me.

"No problem," he said.

I could tell Shadrach wasn't in a talking mood. More like a Dead Art mood as he watched the canals.

And then the miracle: he roused himself from his canal contemplation long enough to say, "I could get you protection," all the while staring at me like I was a dead man, which is the self-same stare he always has. But here was my chance.

"Like what, you shiller," I said. "A whole friggin' police unit all decked out in alkie and shiny new bribes?"

He shrugged and said, "I'm trying to help. The bigger the big fish, the more the small fish need a hook."

"Not a bad turn of phrase," I said, lying. "You get that from looking into the water all damn day? What I need is Quin."

Shadrach snorted, said, "You *are* desperate. An invite to Quin?" He wouldn't meet my gaze directly, but edged around it, edged in between it. "Maybe in a million years you'd build up the contacts," he said, "the raw money and influence."

I turned away, because that stung. The robbery stung, the not-being-able-to-sell-the-art stung. *Life* stung. And stunk.

"Easy for you, Shadrach," I said. "You're not a Living Artist. I don't need an invite. Just give me the address and I'll go myself to beg a meerkat. Anything extra I do on my own."

Shadrach frowned, put on a more serious face, said, "You do not know what you are asking for, Nicholas?" I thought I saw fear in him – fear and an uncharacteristic glimpse of compassion. "You *will* get hurt. I know you – and I know Quin. Quin isn't in it for the Living Art. He's in it for other reasons entirely. Things I don't even know."

By now I'd begun to break out in the sweats and a moist heat was creeping up my throat, and, hey, maybe I'd had too much on the drug-side on the way down, so I put a hand on his arm, as much to keep my balance as anything.

"For a friend," I said. "For Nicola. I need a break or I'm going to have to go below level and live out my days in a garbage zone." (And look where I am today? In a garbage zone. Talking to you.)

Bringing up my sister was low – especially because I owed her so much money – but bringing up below level was lower still. Shadrach still had nightmares about living underground with the mutties and the funny people, and the drip-drip-drip of water constantly invading the system.

He stared at me, white-faced, the knuckles of his hands losing colour where they clutched the rail. Did he, I hoped, see enough of my sister in me?

But I'm not heartless – when I saw him like that, the hurt showing as surely as if they'd broken up a day ago, I recanted. I said, "Forget it, my friend. Forget it. I'll work something else out. You know me. It's okay-dokey."

Shadrach held me a moment longer with his grey, unyielding eyes and then he sighed and exhaled so that his shoulders sagged and his head bowed. He examined his stick-on sandals with the seriousness of a podiatrist.

"You want Quin," he said, "you first have to promise me this is a secret – for life, god help you. If it gets out Quin's seeing someone like you, there'll be a whole bunch of loonies digging up the city to find him."

Someone like you hurt, but I just said, "Who am I going to tell? Me, who's always borrowing for the next holo? People avoid me. I am alone in the world. Quin's could get me close to people."

"I know," he said, a bit sadly, I thought.

"So tell me," I said. "Where is it?"

"You have to tell Quin I sent you," he said, and pointed a finger at me, "and all you want is to buy a meerkat."

"You that budsky-budsky with Quin," I said, incredulous – and a little loud, so a brace of Canal policemen gave me a look like *I* was luny-o.

"Keep your voice down," Shadrach said. Then: "Go west down the canal-side escalators until you see the Mercado street light. There's an alley just before that. Go down the alley. At the end, it looks like a dead-end because there are recycling bins and other debris from the last ten centuries. But don't be fooled. Just close your eyes – it's a holo, and when you're through, there's Quin's, right in front of you. Just walk right in."

"Thank U, Shadrach," I said, heart beating triple-time fast. "I'll tell Nicola that you gave her the time of day."

His eyes widened and brightened, and a smile crossed his face, fading quickly. But I knew, and he knew I knew.

"Be careful," he said, his voice so odd that shivers spiralled up my vertebrae. He shook my hand. "Quin's a strange... man," he said. "When it's over, come and see me. And remember, Nicholas – don't – don't dicker with him over the price to be paid."

Then he was gone, taking long, ground-eating strides away from me down the docks, without even a goodbye or a chance to thank him, as if *I* was somehow tainted, somehow no good. It made me sad. It made me mad. Because I've always said Shadrach was Off, even when Nicola dated him.

Shadrach and Nicola. I've had relationships, but never the Big One. Those loving young lovers strolling down by the drug-free zones, those couples coupling in the shadow of the canals, they don't know what it is to be desperately in love, and perhaps even Nicola didn't know. But I thought Shadrach would die when she left him. I thought he would curl up and die. He should have died, except that he found Quin, and somehow Quin raised him up from the dead.

What does Quin do, you ask? (As if *you* have the right to ask questions knee-deep in garbage. But you've asked so I'll tell you:) Quin makes critters. He makes critters that once existed but don't now (tigers, sheep, bats, elephants, dolphins, albatrosses, seagulls, armadillos, dusk seaside sparrows) or critters that never existed except in myth, *flat media*, or holos (Jabberwocks, Grinches, Ganeshas, Puppeteers, Gobblesnorts, Snarks) or critters that just never existed at

all until Quin created them (beetleworms, eelgoats, camelapes).

But the *best* thing he does – the Liveliest Art of all, for my purposes – is to improve on existing critters. Like meerkats with opposable thumbs. His meerkats are like the old, old Stradi-various violins, each perfect and each perfectly different. Only the rich could procure them, through influence mostly, not money, because Quin didn't work for money, it was said, but for *favours*. Though no one could guess *what* favours, and at what cost. Rumour had it Quin had started out assisting state-sponsored artificial pregnancies, before the fall of government, but no one knew anything concrete about Quin's past.

So I daydreamed about meerkats after Shadrach left me. I imagined wonderful, four-foot tall meerkats with shiny button eyes and carrot noses and cool bipedal movement and can-I-help-you smiles. Meerkats that could do kitchen work or mow the atrophiturf in your favourite downtown garden plot. Even wash clothes. Or, most importantly, cold cock a pick dick and bite his silly weiner off.

This is the principal image of revenge I had branded into my mind quite as violently as those awful nuevo westerns which, as you have no doubt already guessed, are my one weakness: "Ah, yessirree, Bob, gonna rope me a meerkat, right after I defend my lady's honour and wrassle with this here polar bear." I mean, come on! No wonder it was so hard to sell my holo art before the pick dicks stole it.

But as I headed down the alley which looked quite dead-endish later that night – having just had a bout of almost-fisticuffs (more cuffs than fisties) with a Canal District barkeep – I admit to nervousness. I admit to sweat and trembling palms. The night was darker than dark – wait, listen: *the end of the world is night*; that's mine, a single-cell haiku – and the sounds from the distant bright streets only faintly echoed down from the loom 'n' doom buildings. (Stink of garbage, too, much like this place.)

As I stepped through the holograph – a perfect rendition that spooked me good – and came under the watchful "I's in the purple-lit sign, –

QUIN'S SHANGHAI CIRCUS

I did the thrill-in-the-spine bit. It reminded me of when I was a kid (again) and I saw an honest-to-greatness circus, with a *real* sparrow doing tricks on a highwire, even a regular dog all done up in bows. I remember embarrassing my dad by pointing when the dog shat on the circus-ring floor and saying, "Look, Dad, look! Something's coming out the back end!" Like a prize, maybe? I didn't know better. (Hell, I didn't even know my own Dad wasn't real.) Even then the genetic toys I played with – Ruff the Rooster with the cold eyes I thought stared maliciously at me during the night; Goof the Gopher, who told the dumbest stories about his good friends the echinoderms – all produced waste in a nice solid block through the navel.

But I have let my story run away without me, as Shadrach might say but has never said, and into *nastalgia*, and we wouldn't want that.

So: as soon as I stepped into the blue velvet darkness, the doors sliding shut with a *hiss* behind me, the

prickly feeling in my spine intensified, and all the sounds from the alley, all the garbage odours and tastes were replaced with the hum of conditioners, the stench of sterility. This was high class. This was *atmosphere*.

This was *exactly* what I had expected from Quin.

To both sides, glass cages embedded in the walls glowed with an emerald light, illuminating a bizarre bunch of critters: things with no eyes, things with too many eyes, things with too many limbs, things with too many teeth, things with too many *things*. Now I could detect an odour, only partially masked by the cleanliness: the odour of the circus I had seen as a kid – the bitter-dry combination of urine and hay, the musky smell of animal sweat, of animal presence.

The cages, the smell, made me none too curious – made me look straight ahead, down to the room's end, some 30 yards away, where Quin waited for me. It had to be Quin. If it wasn't Quin, Quin couldn't be.

He sat behind a counter display: a rectangular desk-like contraption within which were embedded two glass cases, the contents of which I could not ID. Quin's head was half in dark, half in the glow of an overhead light, but the surrounding gloom was so great that I had no choice but to move forward, if only to glimpse Quin in the flesh, in his seat of power.

When I was close enough to spit in Quin's face, I gulped like an oxygen-choked fishee, because I realized then that not only did Quin lean over the counter, he *was* the counter. I stopped and stared, mine eyes as buggee as that self-same fishee. I'd heard of Don Daly's Self Portrait Mixed Media on Pavement – which consisted of Darling Dan's splatted remains – but Quin had taken an entirely different slant that reeked of genius. (It also reeked of squirrels in the brain, but so what?)

Portrait of the Artist as a slab of flesh. The counter itself had a yellowish-tan hue to it, like a skin transparent before it heals and it was dotted with eyes – eyes which blinked and eyes which did not, eyes which winked, all watching me, watching them.

Every now and again, I swear on my slang jockey grave, the counter undulated, as if breathing. The counter stood some three metres high and 20 long, five wide. In the centre, the flesh parted to include the two glass cages. Within the cages sat twin orangutans, tiny but perfectly formed, grooming themselves atop bonzai trees. Each had a woman's face with drawn cheekbones and eyes that dripped despair and hopelessness.

Atop the counter, like a tree trunk rising out of the ground, Quin's torso rose, followed by the neck and the narrow, somehow serpentine head. Quin's face looked almost Oriental, the cheekbones pinched and sharp, the mouth slight, the eyes lidless.

The animal musk, the bitter-sweetness, came from Quin, for I could smell it on him, pungent and fresh. Was he rotting? Did the Prince of Genetic Recreation rot?

The eyes – a deep blue without hope of reflection – stared down at the hands; filaments running from each of the 12 fingers dangled spiders out onto the counter. The spiders sparkled like purple jewels in the dim light. Quin made them do undulating dances on the countertop which was his lap, 12 spiders in row doing an antique cabaret revue. Another display of Living Art. I actually clapped at that one, despite the gob of fear

deep in my stomach. The fear had driven the slang right out of me, given me the normals, so to speak, so I felt as if my tongue had been ripped from me.

With the sound of the clap – a naked sound in that place – his head snapped toward me and a smile broke his face in two. A flick of his wrist and the spiders wound themselves around his arm. He brought his hands together as if in prayer.

"Hello, sir," he said in a sing-song voice oddly frozen.

"I came for a meerkat," I said, my own voice an octave higher than normal. "Shadrach sent me."

"You came alone?" Quin asked, his blue eyes boring into me.

My mouth was dry. It felt painful to swallow.

"Yes," I said, and with the utterance of that word – that single, tiny word with entire worlds of agreement coiled within it – I heard the glass cages open behind me, heard the tread of many feet, felt the presence of a hundred hundred creatures at my back. Smelled the piss-hay smell, clotted in my nostrils, making me cough.

What could I do but plunge ahead?

"I came for a meerkat," I said. "I came to work for you. I'm a holo artist. I know Shadrach."

The eyes stared lazily, glassily, and I heard the chorus from behind me, in deep and high voices, in voices like reeds and voices like knives: "You came alone."

And I was thinking then, dear Yahwah, dear Allah, dear God, and I was remembering the warm fuzzies and the cold pricklies of my youth, and I was thinking that I had fallen in with the cold pricklies and I could not play omnipotent now, not with the Liveliest of the Living Arts.

And because I was desperate and because I was foolish, and most of all, because I was a mediocre artist of the holo, I said again, "I want to work with you."

In front of me, Quin had gone dead, like a puppet, as much as the spiders on his fingers had been puppets. Behind me, the creatures stepped forward on cloven hooves, spiked feet, sharp claws, the smell overpowering. I shut my eyes against the feel of their paws, their hands – clammy and soft, cruel and hot, as they held me down. As the needles entered my arms, my legs, and filled me with the little death of sleep, I remember seeing the orangutans weeping on their bonzai branches and wondering why they wept for me.

Let me tell you about the city, sir. Like an adder's kiss, sharp and deadly. It's important. Very important. Let me tell you about Quin and his meerkats. I work for Quin now, and that's bad business. I've done terrible. I've done terrible things – the deadest and deadliest of the Dead Arts, the cold pricklies of the soul. I've killed the Living Art. I've killed the living. And I know. I know it. Only. Only the flesh comes off me and the flesh goes on like a new suit. Only the needle goes in and the needle comes out and I don't care, though I try with all my strength to think of Shadrach and Nicola.

But the needle goes in and...

Let me tell you about the city....

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It begins with the Call. You're having a quiet morning at home, Hoovering idly in the nude while you wait for the time for *Teletubbies*, when the phone goes. "Hi," says an unconvincing voice: "This is Steven Spielberg." According to protocol, there then follows an amusing comedy of identities, which will be logged for anecdotal recycling in promotional interviews: "Go on, it's never." "No, really. I get this a lot, you know." "OK then, tell me the codeword." "The codeword is 'This is Steven Spielberg, you little piece of fishstick dick, and I have to make another ten of these calls before brunch.'" "Gosh. You sound shorter in real life." "Never mind that. Look out your window." So you twitch the drapes, and across the street is a massive guy in a suit the colour of Ray-Bans, playing with the keys to a limo with black windows that's double-parked blocking your space. It's then that you sinkingly know you have no choice but to beam aboard whatever vehicle the management has prepared, because there are just three rules about the Call: you don't say "Oh. I thought for a moment it might be Woody Allen"; you don't say "Well, I dunno, I hope this isn't about *Always* IF"; but most of all you *never* say no.

Now, it's quite possible that there really is a Steven Spielberg, that he wasn't replaced by a bug in a human skin in spring of 1994, and that he really does make all these Calls. But it's suspicious that everyone from Will Smith to Pete Postlethwaite comes up with the same memory under even quite light journalistic questioning; and the evidence of this summer's Amblin' monstrosities suggests that the flashing lights may be just a ploy to erase the truth from our unshielded eyes. The reality is, there are no humans in the system any more; what we think we see is manipulated from behind the soundstage by the faceless, finger-printless Men in designer Suits. *Men in Black* includes a flash of Spielberg in its video gallery of aliens among us, along with Newt and Sly and a lot of others we'll have to wait for the video to check out on pause-through. But as the movie makes all too clear, it's not the aliens who are running the show, but the suits who *control* the aliens.

One giveaway sign of a film that's really run by the Men in Suits is that everything in the narrative operates like a movie production, because the MiS haven't bothered to learn how native earthlings actually think, and continue to construct reality in the image of their own metabolic lifecycle. Thus Act I is always Putting the Team Together: you start with the auditions, in which available performers are invited to read for a mystery project because the management has admired their work and thinks they may have what it takes. (In *Men in Black*, Will Smith has to test

against the best of his generation for sense of humour, offbeat action-comedy physical skills, and co-star approval, before the Director will brief him on the project at hand. In *The Lost World*, Jeff Goldblum refuses point-blank to sign up for the sequel at all until Sir Dickie, marginalized now in a distinctly xprod role, makes him the offer he can't refuse by revealing his best girl is already hostage to HUNGRY TYRANNOSAURS on sequel island.) Act II then sends the team into the field, where they do a lot of rather aimless shooting around in the hope of a hit; and Act III is the post-production, where our surviving heroes struggle against the clock to get their unruly monster in the can before the release date catches up on them.

The Lost World looks and feels like a film nobody but the MiS wanted to do. If anything, the public and press have been too kind to this lugubrious concoction of pointless spectacle and mayhem, with its slab-cuts of gabbled exposition, set pieces protracted to three times their natural Young's modulus of tension, and unlovable characters wittering on about their interest-free relationship problems. The cast are uniformly unappealing: even Jeff Goldblum is a glum prospect when he's not allowed actually to do anything humorous, while Arliss Howard's Dialect Coach (credited) should have been tossed to the rap-tors. Startlingly messy, with a thrown-together-by-committee feeling you don't expect from Spielberg, it nevertheless does extend and darken the interesting exploration, begun in *Jurassic Park*, of the director's mid-life relationship with the kind of cinema he's traditionally come to embody.

Certainly *The Lost World's* plotline reads like the testament of a very disgruntled captive creator. The original *Jurassic Park* movie was a sincere, if very unCrichtonly, apologia for Spielberg's own career pre-*Schindler* as a showman of spectacle. Its radical rewrite of the novel's John Hammond character offered a confessional self-portrait of the well-meaning filmmaker's Faustian predicament, arguing plaintively for the ethical necessity of a popular cinema of fantasy and spectacle as an outlet for those dangerous desires that science might otherwise be asked to fulfil. Tellingly, however, the sequel's point of departure is the avuncular creator's loss of control to a besuited conglomerate of commercial interests, and his struggle to save the integrity of the world he created from the heartless alliance of boardroom accountants who see it as merely a resource to be exploited. To that end, he recruits our (*very* reluctant) hero into a small film unit to go out on a gruelling location shoot in the tropics with only their trailers for comfort



(David Koepp, who gets sole script credit this time, has clearly been profoundly moulded by the experience of shooting second unit), before the big production crew arrives under Arliss Howard and his crack team of highly-expendable grunts to jack up the bodycount. Pretty soon the set is overrun with people chasing a whole ecosystem of conflicting agendas, some of them explicable, some of them Pete Postlethwaite, with the most heavily-armed players hellbent on grabbing control of the noble titan's baby to wrest him back to CA for one final mother of all sideshows. The final victory for nature, parenthood, and allowing creative processes to develop in their own spontaneous way looks like a trouncing for corporate entertainment, at least inasmuch as its spokesman gets eaten by a tyrannosaur. But that's just what



they'd want us to think; and the utter feebleness of this compared to any real Spielberg film, ever, does leave you wondering just who's been eaten by whom.

By contrast, *Men in Black*, an amiable enough film that's become a bigger hit and icon than it probably merits, is content to go with the flow: putting a plausible case that film-making by natural selection, where you turn an odd assortment of reasonably-talented people loose on a project and take whatever makes it to the final cut, might actually be quite a good way to make films. (As Sir Dickie put it in the expanded moral of his sequel, "These creatures require our absence to survive, not our help; and if we can only step aside and trust in nature, life will find a way.") At the same time, there's no denying that, follow-

ing a protracted stop-go production history, *MiB*'s eventual arrival is timed to a cusp: best of a weak summer's field, buoyed on nostalgia for *Independence Day*, and surfing the tsunami of ufological conspiracy chic in the wake of an unprecedentedly rich and inventive season of ever-zanier USAF denials. Some will write this uncanny alignment of happy synchronicities down to Zeitgeist, judgment or luck; but as you delve, the evidence does kind of mount.

The key thing about *Men in Black* is that none of the named suspects is in control. Spielberg just made the phone calls, while helmsman Barry Sonnenfeld is a gifted package director, a system player, the guy you hire when you want quirky you can control. Nor is the original maker much in evidence. "Purchase the comic books," suggests a well-spoken endti-

tle; but in fact the final version of *Men in Black* has largely and wisely dispensed with Lowell Cunningham's original series, whose heavier-handed art, character, and situations never really lived up to the potential of their borderline-brilliant premise – itself most of a decade ahead of its time, in an era before *X-Files*, the Roswell revival, and the coopting of Area 51 as a State visitor attraction. On the whole, the movie does milk a powerful mythology quite well in its own right, with sensitivity to its early-60s period flavour – even if the chic metropolitan setting doesn't really gel with the landscape of trailer parks and desert motels where the real-life *MiB* tales are most resonantly at home.

Though nicely written, it isn't really a writer's movie either. Ed Solomon, less-famous half of the wildly-erratic team that gave us *Bill*

and *Ted* but also *Mom and Dad Save the World* (a film I still suspect no other living human has ever seen, and with good reason), got put through a lot of hefty rewrites, and the final version reputedly bears little resemblance to his first script. Not that it seems to have hurt: while some of the narrative (especially the climax) does have a feeling of having been bolted together from different-sized pieces, many of the jokes remain surprisingly upmarket. "No, ma'am," says Tommy Lee to the widow D'Onofrio's suspicion that



Men in Black: above, Tommy Lee Jones – "a dangerously over-praised actor of some presence" plays Agent Kay, with, right, "...the shamefully underused..." Linda Fiorentino plays Dr Laurel Weaver.

Street vendor, puzzled: "I don't have any dead." Maybe I'm too easily disarmed by all this, but these deadpan collisions of surrealistically incompatible worldviews do seem purposeful: now and again, and not just in the throwaway animated gag coda, there seems a real attempt to deliver the kind of vertiginous swerve of cosmic perspective that gives the classic Matheson/Solomon scripts their feel of genuine respect for the sf experience. (When was the last time a summer blockbuster took the trouble to *correct* a glib piece of soundbite non-science like "the galaxy is on Orion's belt"?) For whatever reason, somebody has taken a lot of trouble to let this stuff through.

Even those with genuine clout are subtly disempowered and marginalized by the finished package. It's no secret that Tommy Lee Jones was the senior player in the cast, and co-star Smith a late recruit in a project that had already been retailored extensively to fit the bespoke requirements of a powerful star with a bastard-from-hell reputation, who hadn't been any too warm on the sidekick idea in the first place. The revenge is that Jones – a dangerously-overpraised actor of some pres-



their visit is a joke: "we at the FBI do not have a sense of humour we're aware of." The addition of those last three words is sheer gratuitous class, of a kind that *MiB* is refreshingly willing to negotiate a moment of screentime for, even at \$10K a second and with Sonnenfeld's trademark 90-minute running time. An important component of the distinctive comic texture is a succession of cross-purpose dialogue gags so silly that a lesser script would have blued them out on the first read-through. "What was that?" says the farmer's wife following the saucer crash in the yard. "Sugar!" demands the giant bug who's just taken over hubby Vincent D'Onofrio's skin. Wife, sceptical: "I've never seen sugar do that." Or the alien D'Onofrio, looking for the morgue: "Where do you keep your dead?"

ence but limited comic range – is rather outclassed, and the moment it (very early) becomes apparent that the shamefully-underused Linda Fiorentino is being positioned on the reserve bench for a sequel, it's hard not to fidget at having to sit through him when we could be watching her. It's supposed to be a joke when Smith tells Jones, on donning suit and shades: "You know the difference between you and me? I make this look good." But he really does, while Fiorentino looks such a total money shot modelling hers that you could raise the budget for the follow-up just by sitting in the foyer taking Visa. Contrariwise, you can tell from the start Jones isn't quite comfortable in

the outfit from the way something about his cut makes his head look too big and his chest too small – not enough to disrupt the role, but still suspiciously like the *MiS*'s equivalent of a note on his back saying DICK-HEAD.

So what exactly are they trying to beam into our brains with all this? Well, as usual the aliens-among-us scenario allows, and the wetback-smuggling prologue here positively encourages, all kinds of otherwise-unthinkable thoughts about race, class, and us people/you people/them people to bubble into light; and as usual it's liberal on the surface, but Republican as scary hell if you scratch the makeup to see what's under the latex. Reassuring about the containability of immigration and underclass crime, *MiB* finesses fortress-America instincts for isolationism and social apartheid into just another a demonstration of the multiculturalism and universal tolerance that built a mighty nation in the first place. If Manhattan needs a heavily-armed, self-financing, and completely unaccountable SWAT operation to insulate decent citizens from the crimewave borne in on the tide of aliens, that's because NYC is one great big Ellis Island for galactic wetbacks seeking a new life on the planet of opportunity; which is fine, so long as they immerse fully in the native culture, bury all trace of their ethnicity under layers of special makeup, assent to round-the-clock video tagging, and don't try to mate with our females. Sure, it's true we're being fed a big lie by our invisible masters, but then they do selflessly take it on themselves not only to patrol the mean streets between the cracks in the pavement, but to spare us the intolerable burden of engaging with reality for ourselves.

All this would all be well within permitted limits of Hollywood dodginess, were it not for the uneasy suspicion that this is how the *MiS* who run the entertainment industry really do see their role as a third force in society. *MiB* is very, very careful to disengage its traceless anonyms from any association with big government, industry, or the military: on the contrary, they're a benign demonstration of the intrinsic goodness of non-accountable covert operations funded solely by free-market commerce across a range of territories beyond the reach of any earth government. And in a gesture that becomes progressively more signifying and resonant as the film unfolds, the act of donning very dark designer eyewear comes to segregate the masters of reality from the slaves. You just shine the light in their eyes, and those suckers'll lap up any old garbage you feed them. (Is that the phone? Don't pick up.)

Nick Lowe



Photo: Paul Brazier



Photo: Paul Brazier



Photo: Paul Brazier



Photo: Paul Brazier

Craig Charles is not funny. It's important, so concentrate while I say it again. Craig Charles is not, intrinsically, funny. Yes, of course, he can *become* funny. Or more properly, Lister can be funny. But Craig Charles is not Lister. Give Craig Charles some funny lines to deliver and, usually, I'll laugh. Rely on his boyish charm and inherent humorousness, though, and you'll have something else entirely. Something like the disastrously humour-free *Captain Butler*, say, or the insulting coverage he fronted of the 1995 Glasgow SF Worldcon or even, ultimately, the pile of cack that is *Space Cadets*.

I feel rather proprietorial about *Space Cadets* (Tuesdays, Channel 4, and then repeated Wednesdays just before *Babylon 5*) because, if you remember, I put forward the idea that we should have a post-modernist, humorous, quiz show about sf in my first column of this year. What I had in mind, of course, was to give sf the treatment which *Have I Got News For You*, *Never Mind the Buzzcocks* and *They Think It's All Over* give to, respectively, news, pop and sport. And, have you noticed, you can watch any of those three programmes with enjoyment even if you don't know anything about news, pop or sport: the key elements are accessibility and humour. The questions are either ones we feel we know the answers to, or that we might have once known the answers to but have taken on too much alcohol to recall just at the moment, or else that no one in the universe except Paul Merton would be able to answer.

Space Cadets might have achieved accessibility by using some clips from things we recognized. But it didn't. Its concentration on dreadful old B-movies began as mildly amusing but only in the sense that the anorak joke is mildly amusing the first time you encounter it. When you keep encountering it it becomes insulting.

Non-literary sf isn't *Flash Gordon* serials any more: it's *The X-Files* and *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* and *Xena* and *Babylon 5* and *The Fifth Element*. Yet in *Space Cadets* the films and TV shows that make up the public perception of the present-day genre are conspicuous by their absence. What, would no one give them clips without charging a king's ransom? Couldn't Channel 4 afford at least a few? Well, one, even?

Space Cadets might have achieved vague familiarity, at least, by using clips from some out-of-first-rights television we might have seen the first time around: some *Doctor Who*, for example, or some *Blake's 7*, or *The Tomorrow People*, or *Tarot: Ace of Wands* for goodness' sake. But it didn't. Again, too much negotiation required? Too much money? Too

Left from the top: Craig Charles, Walter Koenig, Sylvester McCoy, and Bill Bailey during the press launch of Channel 4's *Space Cadets*.

TUBE CORN

Wendy Bradley

much effort, perhaps?

Space Cadets might have achieved the Paul Merton-is-God effect by making use of Kim Newman's arcane and terrifyingly comprehensive knowledge of, amongst other things, 1950s sci-fi B-movies. Having a regular guest who could get all the answers right would have made a cool running joke, as well as being interesting in itself. But *Space Cadets* didn't even manage to do that, even though he guested and, yes, he knew all the answers. But, no, it wasn't funny.

Instead they lured a motley crew of unknown comedians (Bill who?) and some variable quality guests to Glasgow for what seemed like a good lig (so where's my invitation then?) but which never managed to get the mix right between the gobsmackingly famous (Captain Kirk! A Doctor Who! Ivanova!) and the knowledgeable but sadly fame-challenged, and showed them all, from the evidence, a jolly good time. Regrettably however their good time seems *not* to have been the good time that was had by all: again, the producers should note that with a comedy show the enjoyment of the proceedings by the studio audience is in inverse proportion to the enjoyment of the resulting programme by the television audience.

I have, for example, sat in on the recording of an episode of *'Allo 'Allo* (hey, I went to school with the writer's sister, OK?) and the actual process is fully as tedious as you imagine. But it is tedious because of the patient skill involved in getting the scene put together in exactly the way which will create a laugh on the screen.

Whether that process is also funny to the studio audience is entirely incidental: they are there purely to provide a plausibly live laugh track – if necessary, by having one of the more famous members of the cast come down and tell dirty jokes until they give in and laugh sincerely enough. That is part of the deal you make when you sign up to join the audience: you trade proximity to the action for the promise you'll act like a studio audience. As the old actor's saying goes, "dying is easy: comedy's hard."

So, OK, I'm not happy with the choice of team captains or the mix of guests, or for that matter the cheap sets and the B-movie clips and I think they all partied too much in the making to make the party come alive on screen. But what else?

Well, how about the actual questions asked. How could they have a round where they ask the contestants to identify bits of alien bric à brac in a variant of *Call my Bluff*, but make one of the bits of bric à brac Orac? I mean, Orac? Orac was a character for cryin' out loud – OK, not a human character, but as the humans got written out you had to



Third Rock from the Sun: "incognito aliens researching Earth" – Sally (Kristen Johnston), Dick (John Lithgow), Harry (French Saunders) and Tommy (Joseph Gordon-Levitt). Below: "Sally, the feminist icon..."

count Orac to get to *Blake's 7* or else change the name of the show to *Blake's 5* or *6*, which would have been silly. If you're too young to remember *Blake's 7*, then take it from me that Servalan's brooch is one thing but Orac had a voice, and I recognized him/it as soon as they brought the perspex box of tricks out.

And I was sorely insulted that the producers thought that I wouldn't: there needed to be a punch line to excuse insulting the core and boring the mundane audience in that way.

And there wasn't.

Third Rock From the Sun is back too, on BBC 2 on Thursdays, and it only serves as a pointed contrast with our own comedy offerings. It is a cliché that we only get the best of American sitcoms over here and their schedules are stuffed with as much rubbish – (whaddaya mean as much? – more, bigger, better rubbish!) as ours, but I'm not convinced. We haven't got anything that comes close to being as slick, as inventive, as goddamit funny, as *Third Rock*, and no amount of recycling *The Good Life* and *Dad's Army* will persuade me otherwise.

There isn't anything particularly new about the "incognito aliens researching earth" plot line, but *Mork and Mindy* sentimentality is avoided in favour of an acerbic and unusually witty subversion of the usual "let's round up what we've learned about humanity today" morality-play ending. Let's sit on the roof and talk about our feelings, OK, but let's not pretend to have solved anything, and if we *do* feel the need for a group hug, it will probably involve someone falling off the roof in the excitement.

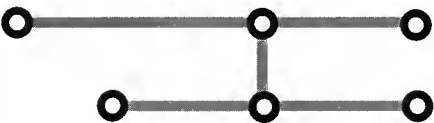
So apart from the slickness, the humour, the lack of sentimentality and (of course) Sally the feminist icon, I finally realized why I like *Third Rock* so much when they showed the episode where our four resident aliens visited the sf convention. Nope, no anorak jokes, no Spock ears – they *like* the genre and its fans rather than despising us!

How refreshing. What a difference. The powers that be in British TV seem to treat us all as nerdy losers who are ourselves inherently funny because we're dumb enough to want to watch this crap. The American TV powers see us as just another demographic. Yes, comrades, we have money! We buy soap too! We'll watch advertising, if it's wrapped around programmes we like! Maybe we should organize an *anti-boycott* and all rush out to buy any product advertised in the ad breaks of *Babylon 5*.

I'd rather be a demographic than an anorak any day.

Wendy Bradley





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CIVILIZATION

Nicola Caines

Elmo hefted the heavy pails of slops out to the pigsties. "Come on, swine!" he cried, as he did every day. "Come and get it!" The swine needed no bidding from him; the joys of the slop pails were enough for them – and no thoughts of future consequences. Elmo watched them, taking pleasure in their pleasure, scratching among the ginger bristles on the old sow's back with a dry twig.

It was a day like any other: most days were the same for him. Sometimes it rained, and the skies were grey and cold, and his chores seemed to weigh him down more as he trudged about the yards, a split sack protecting his head and shoulders; slapping through the new mud, everything gently steaming around him. But mostly the sun shone and the sky was a deep cobalt blue above the flat fields. Sometimes the corn was green, sometimes dark gold and sometimes pale flax; he liked those swathes of colour next to the blue.

He knew all the moods of the corn. Sometimes the wind blew and the corn grew restless and uneasy. Sometimes there were gales that flattened patches of it as if a great animal had curled up there to sleep. This was Elmo's world and it was all he knew. It stretched away from him as far as the eye could see, the open lands, broken here and there by a rounded hill; the fields, the sky, a few trees. He knew there were other things beyond this world but he had never seen them.

For him there was only the unbroken ceaselessness of labour – caring for the animals, working in the fields – but it was all he expected, and all that was expected of him. They said he was simple; he wasn't the same as other folks. But it didn't seem to matter. His ma and pa were kind to him and they loved him, and so did his brothers Tod and Jim and his sister Ann. His ma cooked good food that he gobbled up as greedily as the swine. You needed good food for the work. He grew up straight and strong, and the girls never seemed to mind dancing with him at the harvest-homes and barn-dances.

His life was governed by light. When it came, he rose from his bed and the day's work began. He never tired of its changes across sky and cloud and land. At night, when these things were past, he liked to watch it playing in the heart of the fire, the embers shimmering with white heat in the deep, strange caves the fire made. They would gather to the warmth, and his father or his uncle might begin the stories. Sometimes the stories were from books; his father would open the book and

the story would fly out into his father's mouth. The stories were just about the best thing in the world. They took you outside yourself to places you had never been.

Sometimes they were of the Old World that was no more; of the days of terror when that world came to pass away; how all the people died as the great plagues ravaged every country, every town. There was a thing called "Civilization," and it had broken down. He did not know what that meant, but they had been great ones for machines then, and sometimes the machines had broken down.

He liked to hear about the machines for travelling in. The people built roads for them, and the roads went on and on; they joined other roads like tributaries join streams, they covered the whole world. When they got tired of riding around, the people would go home to their big cities where they lived in great crystal palaces touching the sky. There was no room for animals in the cities the Old People built: no room for trees or fields, but only the people and the sky. The people got more and more and the sky got less and less, as they crowded it out with all their tall turrets and towers. But they had the thing called "Civilization," and it was very precious. He wondered where it was now.

The machines he liked best from the old days were the Steam Engines. The first time he saw a picture of one, he held his breath. It was huge and obviously very strong and heavy. It had a beautiful shape to it, like a beast with a long snout and eyes set far back. It was shiny and black with gleaming gold decorations on it and a funnel with the steam coming out. It had big wheels that could grind you up, but they said it always stayed on its line of rails. He wondered about that: there was a picture where you couldn't see any rails and it looked as if the Engine was in the middle of some fields. It must have been going very fast because you could see the smoke pluming out behind it. All the old machines were frightening, but this one was not sinister: it seemed benevolent, as though it would like to be helpful. It made a loud noise, they said, and it hissed when the steam escaped. In its heart the bright fire glowed just like the fire he knew. He thought it looked like a dragon. His mother said there were no dragons, but how did she know?

He'd like to see a Steam Engine rushing along in all its noise and gleaming glory. Why had the Old People stopped using them? Why would you want to go in

those small cars all on your own, when you could go in one of the great Engine's carriages and be together with everyone else, whisked along by the thrilling dragon with its heart of fire? He would never understand those Old People.

Elmo's brother Jim knew where the Engines used to run along their rails. He took Elmo to see it. It was not far, across the fields and along some lanes, and Elmo remembered playing there sometimes when he was a child. Jim led him into a dark and gloomy cutting, between rocks covered in brilliant green moss and large drooping ferns. It was almost oppressively verdant and he felt afraid to follow Jim into its stifling embrace. It was like stepping into a serpent's gullet. He almost turned back, but ahead of him were big dusty shafts of sunlight, and he soon emerged thankfully on the other side. It was a beautiful sunny day, the sky was an intense blue, and below it the ripe corn was sighing gently to itself, dreaming. The billowy white clouds were piled one above the other like feather pillows and there was a cool, clear, fluttery breeze.

Not far ahead, he could see a deserted station made of bleached, decayed weather-boarding, blond as ash-wood in the sunshine. He knew this was where the train would stop after it came through the cutting. People would get out and some, who had been waiting and looking out for the distant white plume in the train's helmet, would get in. And away it would whisk them, across fields and rivers, hills and plains to wherever they wanted to go. But it would always, always, stay on the track. It would never go careering off wildly to follow its own adventures. He wanted to see the world through its eyes, to be taken to places that only its magic could take you to.

They were approaching the deserted station now, walking easily along the rotting wooden sleepers that had yellow-and-blue flowers growing up between them. He wasn't sure he liked the station; old human buildings were usually haunted. Were the Old People still there, looking out of the glassless windows with their dead eyes? It was quieter around the station than anywhere else. Then a loose bit of window-frame began to knock gently against the clapboard walls as the breeze lifted it, and that made it seem quieter still. They stood on the platform that was covered in weeds and had forgotten what it was there for. No trains would stop there now. Not ever again.

They left the old station with its gaping roof and sagging walls and walked on along the track. They came to a place where it forked in two; one of the forks seemed to be the main one and their eyes followed its curving line on through the countryside. The other disappeared among trees and looked choked with vegetation, but Elmo felt a strong desire to follow it. He ran on excitedly while Jim sat down to rest and revive himself from a small cider bottle he carried.

Elmo discovered that the overgrown appearance of his chosen path was misleading; soon the trees thinned, and there was a sort of clearing grown with tall fronded yellow grasses. There the track came to an end, and there, right there in front of him, lay a big brown monster. He understood what it was at once: the bones of

an old Steam Engine. It seemed to him it must have crept up here to die, and there it lay between the green band of trees and the feathery paleness of the grasses. It was not dangerous.

Trembling, he approached its rusty flank. Poor old Engine, it wasn't meant for this. He touched it sympathetically. It was exhilarating to find its lair. Carefully, he climbed all over it, examining funnel, boiler and footplate. Even sunk in decay, it was still beautiful.

On the ground again, gazing up at its crouching mass, he saw a rusted sign bolted to the side. He remembered that the Engine's often had names given to them. Would he be able to read it? Only if it was a word he knew. Screwing up his eyes as he peered at it, he suddenly let out a whoop of joy, leapt into the air, and began running back to fetch Jim. It was a word he knew all right: "Civilization." So that was where it had got to.

"Look, Jim!" he cried, dragging his reluctant brother with him, gabbling out his breathless interpretation of what he'd found as they stood before the ancient behemoth. "Look, Jim! The last resting place of Civilization!"

Jim laughed and laughed, doubling himself up. Maybe it was the cider that had done it. Elmo watched him doubtfully.

"Never you mind, old lad," he spluttered at last. "You're right about it being a steam engine. And you found it all by yourself, dintcha? Who'da thought it – one of the old engines, right here on our doorstep!"

Elmo couldn't wait to get back and tell Ann about his marvellous find. He knew she would understand and share his pleasure. So would his father. He would bring them all to see it. A longing arose in him to show it to them as it would have been in the days of its glory: shining, clean of rust, gleaming with oil, all its working parts in order. He seemed to see a vision of it, steam rising once more from its funnel, its whistle blowing, repainted and ready to go; ready to take them – where he didn't know, but somewhere full of magic.

During the next few days, Elmo led his family, friends and neighbours on guided tours to inspect his find. They were impressed. No one had ever seen a Steam Engine; it exerted its fascination over them all. It entered their dreams. The men dreamed of making it run again. The women dreamed of making it clean and shining, painting it and polishing its brasses. So they were easily drawn to Elmo's vision.

They discovered a large stone building. Trees had crept up all around it and ivy had almost hidden it, but it was in better shape than the station. The men said it was an "Engine Shed" and got very excited about it. They found lots of interesting forgotten things there: tools, tracks, sleepers. The men thought that if they could move the old engine there, they could work on it more easily, and maybe they could bring it back to life again. There were those who shook their heads and muttered that things from the Old Time should be left alone; those machines had led the Old People into bad ways and that was why they had all died. But no one listened. Everyone was far too excited and they all shared the same dream. There was fire inside them, as there would be inside the Engine again one day.

And so it began. They worked together, men and women, scraping away the rust, putting oil on the wheels to make them go round, mending the rails to take the Engine to its new home. On that day Elmo went with Ma and Pa and Ann to watch as they harnessed in front of it every ox and horse that could be begged or borrowed. Elmo and Ann climbed up to release the brake and, as the beasts strained and lunged forward, the Engine began to move. Slowly, it inched forward, Elmo and Ann riding high like king and queen, leaning out, waving. Children ran alongside, shrieking. The shed had been cleared and repaired ready for the Engine, and at last it was installed. Now the real work could begin.

And so it went on. Every day people worked there when they could be spared. There was a lot to do, and as the months went by Elmo thought it never would be finished. Sometimes even the cleverest people didn't know what to do next, but they always seemed to find out from books or from trying out different things. Men and women would set out on long journeys to find materials they needed. Some of them were working on making good the stretch of line down to the old cutting. Rotten sleepers were replaced, but much of the rail was still serviceable. Everyone helped as best they could; it was a bit like a barn-raising. Difficulties were things to be fretted at like knots, and were the subjects of many a lively debate. There were always lamps burning at the Engine Shed till late at night.

Elmo and Ann would visit the Engine together in the evenings when all their chores were done. They strolled down together, talking companionably. They liked to see the human figures crawling all over the Engine, making it whole. They joined in, working harder than anyone, because Elmo loved the Engine and Ann loved Elmo.

And so it was finished. The Engine was wheeled out of its shed at the beginning of summer. There were few there to see, as many of the volunteers had work to do in the fields, but those who were there cheered and waved till they were hoarse. It looked magnificent: gleaming and black like a finely bred horse. The brass-work shone, the polished plate on the boiler spelt out its name boldly. Ann and her friend Ellen had painted delicate flowers and blades of grass all along its sides. That had been Elmo's idea, to make them think of the Engine running free through meadows of wild flowers, but it had been Ann's idea to paint them in a bright garland curling round the cab.

"Come on, you idlers!" Jim shouted. "Were not finished yet. We gotta get the steam up!"

They ran to join the team who would put fire into the Engine's belly. Gradually the throng was swollen by groups of field-workers on their way home, their labours finished, tired but unable to keep away. This would be a grand sight to see; even folk from as far as Curzon drove over in their buggies to witness the event.

At last all was ready: the fire was roaring, the boiler filled. There was a heady smell of oil and smoke. This time Elmo did not want to ride the footplate with Ann. They ran up the easy slope of the nearest rise and, panting, they turned to look. This was the moment. From their vantage point, they could see the whole of the Engine, with the green grass flowing right up to it, almost hiding the tracks. Jim and Tod were the drivers;

they made the whistle give a piercing shriek. Women clapped their hands over their ears. Children shouted in shrill excited voices. The Engine began to move; it made sudden breathy noises, like someone blowing out sharply through their nose. It gathered speed. As they watched, awed, it rushed along the track, fast as a galloping horse. Then it cried aloud with a great voice, a long echoing yell, like a true dragon. All too soon it ended, though. The drivers, leaning like heroes from the high cab, put the brakes on and brought it to a standstill at last, just feet from the end of the restored track.

It was a triumph. But where now? There were plans to clear the track into the cutting and on towards Curzon. The work continued, in a spasmodic way, for most of the summer but Elmo was restless, and purposeless. He couldn't see what came next; he had been derailed. He spent a lot of time with the Engine, standing at its side, his hand resting on the footplate, talking to it in a low, soft voice.

One evening at the height of summer he walked with Ann up Eden Hill. It was fine and clear and they watched the stars coming out as the light drifted away. There were more of them than you could ever count; they made the sky seem deeper than before.

"Look!" Ann said breathlessly. "A shooting star!" Sure enough, one spot of brilliance was moving. It bolted across the boundary of the far horizon, still red with sunset, and descended ever lower.

"It's going to crash to the ground!" Elmo shouted. They clutched each other as the bright thing fell from the sky, scudding in at an oblique angle, and disappearing behind the hill. There was a dazzling flash, and the kind of bang that, although it happens far off, feels as if it originated in the middle of your head.

"It's all right, Elmo," Ann said, "I reckon it's a meteor from out in space. Just a big lump of rock, see, flying above the sky. Sometimes they crash to earth. Pa told me he seen one once."

Elmo was hardly listening; he seized her hand. "Come on, we got to find it."

"No, Elmo." She drew back reluctantly. "It might be red hot. It might be dangerous."

But it ended with her following slowly, while Elmo ran on ahead. He couldn't run all the way, it was too far, so they walked the last stretch together. Elmo put his arm around her shoulders: "Don't worry, Ann. It won't hurt us, I got a feeling." Ann suspected that Elmo had the power to see straight to the heart of things, to perceive their true nature. She continued walking, against her better judgment.

The shooting star had cut a swathe through some woods and come to rest beyond them in the middle of a cornfield. At least it was not on fire. It did not look much like a rock: it was long and slender and, by moonlight, a slightly metallic white. It had magnificent white feathered wings, like a dove but set further back and fanned out into two triangles. Clouds of dust were still settling around it. They approached it cautiously, and kept it under observation for some time. Elmo put out his hand hesitantly and held it as near to the fallen star as he dared; there was no sensation of heat as he had expected. When he finally touched it, it was cool and slightly pliable, like leather. Walking around it, they

found what looked like a panel, maybe even a door of some kind, set flush to the structure; otherwise it was smooth and featureless.

"It's a spaceship," Ann said, wonderingly. "Pa showed me some pictures once. He told me the Old People used to shoot 'em off into space and travel in them to the moon, and way beyond too. I always thought they must have been bad things – shooting made me think of guns, those horrible guns they had, remember? All those terrible wars. But this one is different: it seems strange. It don't look like an Old People kind of thing – it don't look angry enough."

"It hasn't come from the Old People," Elmo said, and he laid his palm on the door. The ship seemed to shudder gently and sigh. They sprang back, startled, and saw the door slide soundlessly away, leaving a gaping hole, not black as they might have expected but emitting a dim, pulsing light. After that, nothing else happened for a long time. Expecting some creature to emerge, they had remained poised for flight. Slowly it dawned on them that nothing was going to, and they became bolder by degrees. Elmo resolved to enter the ship. Ann was aghast, both at his courage and at his foolhardiness.

"Don't, Elmo, you're crazy," she begged, vainly trying to pluck him back from the doorway. He patted her hand reassuringly; somehow, he had become the authoritative one.

"Don't be scared," he said, "there's no one in there." And he was right, though he still found himself holding his breath as he stooped to enter. The inner surfaces glowed a muted pearl-grey. At the furthest end, some sort of display panel shone with mysterious, brightly coloured lights and they were set at intervals along the fuselage as well, but there was no sign of anyone, no crew of any kind and none of the furnishings, comforts or equipment that would surely be required by humans undertaking such a voyage.

As he gazed open-mouthed around him, more and more lights began to wink into life. He could have run away then but he had no feeling of dread to prompt such a move. He put his hand and his ear to the plump, curved wall of the thing and listened intently. There was a slight warmth, a suggestion of rhythmic movement, a sussuration of sound. It was alive, breathing on the inside. Before he could react – and he was not sure what reaction might be suitable – a voice spoke.

"You are correct in deducing the organic nature of this being," it said; then in a less formal but more stumbling tone: "Sorry, El-mo, I am not quite myself after that crash. I – didn't know how to speak to you. I see you're not afraid. That's good. You have some understanding of me, I think."

"I knew you was alive," he said. "You, the spaceship, are talking to me, Elmo."

"That's right," the Ship said. "I am a Biologically Engineered Exploration Vessel, but all you need to know is that I am alive, and I can talk to you."

"Were you hurt in the crash, Vessel?"

"I'm afraid so, Elmo. I have sustained severe damage to some of my functions. I mean, I am still alive, but I cannot move any more. Some of the damage I am already repairing, some I cannot. I will be able to tell you more later."

"I expect you need to rest till you feel better," Elmo said.

"Thank you for your concern," the Ship said; "if you are going to leave me, I would prefer it if you told no one else about me, for the time being. They would not understand and it would take such a long time to explain to them. Ask your companion not to speak either – please." Its expression was changing gradually; its first utterances had been deep, flat and rather hesitant. Now its voice was softer, more confident, and its use of tone, pitch and modulation were becoming more subtle and varied. It sounded more human all the time.

"Is there anything we can bring back with us to help you? Some kind of medicine – food, maybe?" The ship thanked him for his kindness, but assured him it had everything it needed.

Ann had summoned enough courage to peer through the door, trying to see who he was talking to. As he emerged into the moon and starlight, he saw her look of puzzlement. The door closed behind him.

"Come on," he said, "I'll tell you as we walk home. And you tell me everything you know about spaceships – everything."

Next day Ann insisted on returning with him to see for herself that he'd got it right. The Ship was still where they had left it, but it seemed more attentive to its surroundings. The door was open by the time they reached it.

"Come in," it said. "Welcome, Ann."

"Are you feeling better today?" asked solicitous Elmo.

"Much better, thank you. I have repaired myself as far as I am able, but I am still crippled, I'm afraid. Some of the affected areas will regenerate – come back – but I do not think I will ever be able to fly very far."

Elmo looked sober: the ship would never span the distances between the stars again; it could never return home, wherever that was. "Are you sad, Vessel?" he wanted to know.

"No, Elmo, I am practical, not sad. I will make a new life here."

Over the following weeks, they visited the ship every day, and marked its progress. They had long conversations with it and learned many things. After a month it tried some experimental flights which were of limited success, but the rough landings were not good for it. Elmo would watch it limp hesitantly into the sky, his heart in his mouth; yet suddenly it would wheel like a swan until the lowering sun gilded it, and then it became an eagle, its magic briefly rekindled.

"Vessel," he said, as they rested in the late summer sunshine, leaning against the Ship's side. "You know about the machines from the Old Time?" The Ship affirmed that it did.

"I thought," Elmo said, "I thought, what if we had a very big Old-Time machine? Could you ride on it, maybe?"

Ann looked sharply at Elmo; she could see the way his mind was working. "Oh, Elmo, it couldn't ride on the Steam Engine. There's not enough track for it."

"Steam engine," the Ship said, after a long pause. "You have a steam engine. I should have known this. I have been too preoccupied. If I can manage to reach it, there is a good chance for me. Listen carefully, try to

understand this – I have the capability to meld with this machine of yours, become one with it. I would transform it into an organic structure, fully integrated with me. I would be changed; it would become the basis of my new body.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Ann said doubtfully, “but it wouldn’t do no good. Engines only run on railway tracks: you couldn’t go far. Unless maybe you’d be able to lay the tracks as you went.” She was only half joking; she had great respect for the Ship’s abilities.

It chuckled with rich warmth: “When I am that Engine, Ann, I shan’t need any tracks. I’ll modify the Engine to become part of me, and provide it with power. Something approaching hover-flight is possible: I’ll hardly use the wheels at all.” It sounded quite excited.

There were preparations to be made now. The Ship prepared itself for the short flight; Elmo and Ann prepared the people, and that was the harder job. Many of them mistrusted the Ship. It was a machine, after all, and an alien one at that. A few less salubrious elements were all for burning it, but reason prevailed. People’s attitude to machines had been subtly altered, it seemed, by their experience with the Steam Engine. And this one was alive; you could go and talk to it, and most people did, finding its company convivial. It always knew how to talk to people, it knew how to quieten their fears. It explained things in language they could (more or less) understand, over and over, to everyone who came, and it never seemed to mind repeating itself.

It promised to spend a part of every year after its transformation helping them with transportation, and other things too – so many things that they made Elmo’s head reel. It could teach them about where it had come from and the beings who made it. It could help sick people. It was pretty good on diseases of corn and beasts. So many useful things. But it wouldn’t always be with them. It would follow its own dreams too.

The morning of the Transformation dawned fresh and clear, the air sharp with the edge of autumn, and a crowd gathered early, in festive mood. Most of them brought picnics and aimed to make a day of it. Everyone wanted to ask Elmo about what was going to happen, which made him feel very important. Ann was with the Ship; she and her friends would see it begin its flight, and he would see it land. Soon.

As his father was the only member of the family to possess a watch, Elmo was relying on Pa to warn them as the time approached. When he saw Pa waving and pointing at his wrist, Elmo scanned the skies anxiously. He couldn’t see anything in the direction he knew he had to look, and tension mounted as the minutes dragged by. What had happened to the Ship?

It came in low, out of the sun, faster than he had seen it before – like a bird, like an angel, like nothing he had ever known. The white wings arched above him as it sank down towards the Engine crouched on its rails. Wings motionless, it glided in on the morning breeze, the sun scintillating on its skin. As it passed, he thought it trembled: slight shudders that marred the perfection of its progress and reminded him that it was touch and go whether it would make it. Touch and go whether this would be its last flight, brave but profitless. He knew that it was flying on less than half its

capability; what dazzling displays might it once have performed, what glorious soarings?

It coasted in slowly, then seemed to lose control and virtually crash-landed, skewing sideways across the field to come to rest, mercifully, close to its objective. The gasps of the crowd had been replaced by cries of concern, and they moved like a single organism towards the twice-smitten ship. As Elmo struggled to the front the Ship spoke: “I was fortunate,” it said. “I almost failed. I am here, but I have received further injuries. Do not worry, my friends. The damage is minor, but it will be several days before I can attempt the Transformation.”

Nothing could be done except to defer to necessity. Disappointed, the crowd began to disperse. After a while the Ship spoke for Elmo’s ears alone, and it sounded sad: “I am very tired,” it said, and it did not speak again.

Every day he went and sat beside the Ship. Mostly they did not speak; he knew all the Ship’s energies were focused inwards. It was concentrating very hard. He did not neglect the Engine, though. He went to where it stood, motionless on its rails near the silent bulk of the Ship. It was as though the two leviathans were watching each other, taking each other’s measure. He touched the Engine’s side and spoke to it gently, as he had always done, explaining to it what would happen, how it would be changed and its spirit set free.

After four days, the Ship spoke again: “Elmo, my friend,” it said, “I am ready. It will be tomorrow.” And the word went out, as far as Curzon and beyond, to every farm and village, and the people came in their hundreds. By the time they arrived, the Ship had changed its position. Moving very slowly a few inches above the ground with a groaning noise that Elmo knew should not have been there, it came to rest again immediately behind the Engine, and there it stayed for several hours, so that people wondered if they were going to be disappointed once more. The brass band from Curzon had turned up and they filled the hiatus with the joyous confidence that only a brass band can supply.

Then the Ship began to move, the band cut out in mid-blast, and there was a hush of expectation. The forward section of the Ship rose by degrees till it was balanced quite still in a completely vertical position, sitting, in a manner of speaking, on its tail. There was a sudden surge, so that it appeared to lunge at the Engine, hovering above it for a few seconds, wings outspread. People said afterwards that it was like watching a mating between two great beasts, but it reminded Elmo of the picture he had seen at the Chapel house of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. The Ship came to rest, covering the top of the Engine completely. Then it seemed to sigh and relax; its form lost all structural tension, so that it collapsed. They waited patiently but there was no visible action for a long time. Eventually, they noticed that some kind of filaments were extruding themselves from the body of the Ship; to Elmo they were like the spun silk of spiders threads, imperceptible as bubbles gathering at first, then spreading, layer on layer. For a moment Elmo felt his throat constrict at the loss of the mighty Engine. It was barely discernible beneath its shimmering shroud, no longer recognizable as itself. Yet the spectacle was breathtaking; the densely

woven web caught the sunlight like gossamer, refracting into the full spectrum of colours. It was like a cocoon, and now it began to pulse and writhe as if the butterfly were struggling to emerge. There were several long pauses, but at last the cocoon split like a peapod all along the back, and then it just began to melt, flowing down the sides and running off in glistening rivulets. The new creature was completely still, shining like a newborn calf, and so it stayed. A light breeze carried off the remains of the cocoon like streamers of thistledown.

They gazed at it in wonder. The lines of the Engine were softened, moulded, yet retained the essence of its original shape, its promise of strength. The white ship was changed to black, its wings gone. The Engine's outer covering was glossy and textured, like beautiful black skin. The hump of the cab was still visible, though rounded and streamlined and below it on either side were shallow protuberances that looked like sightless eyes. All along its sides and round its neck the flowers that Ann and Ellen had painted bloomed with a fresh intensity of colours, turned to living, breathing flesh, like a lizard's resplendent markings. Still it was silent; they wondered if it were unconscious.

Then it seemed to raise its head; the huge eyelids opened into unfathomable lakes of blue. Everything around it seemed smaller than before, as though this creature were more alive, more real than anything else. It made everyone jump by blowing a jet of water vapour skywards like a whale surfacing. Then it spoke; despite the fact that no fire burned now in its furnace, its voice seemed to suggest the roar of flames. The dragon was awake.

"My friends," it said, "I cannot express how grateful I am to you for making this new life possible. You know that I will do my best to repay you, by teaching you and helping you in every way I can. But such things must come slowly; you must find wisdom as well as learning, to avoid the fate of your predecessors.

"Between us we will find the best ways. I propose to begin by making a long voyage out into the world, to find other peoples, to assess what resources may be safely harnessed. I shall convey your good wishes to all I meet, and I shall return with gifts from them – beau-

tiful things and useful things. There will be new pictures to see, and new music to hear, and perhaps some of you will begin to make new and beautiful things of your own. So now I say goodbye for a time. Special thanks are due to Elmo, without whom I should have no future. Thank you, my friend, but I will not bid you farewell."

Everyone looked round for Elmo, who made his way to the dragon's side, carrying a rucksack on his shoulder. As he approached, a door slid open above what had once been the footplate. He began to climb up.

"Elmo!" shouted his mother, distraught, "what are you doing?"

"Don't fret, Ma!" he shouted back, "I'm going to see the world, and then I'll come home."

The door slid shut, but a small opening materialized like a fold of flesh, and there he was again, smiling and waving as the Engine edged forward. People drew back, uncertain what would happen. The wheels turned and it moved faster towards the cutting, cleared now of obstruction. But it did not enter the cutting. At the last moment it veered away to the right, left the line and streaked away across the neighbouring field. The wheels no longer turned; how it was powered they had no idea, but it seemed an effortless glide, no more than six inches above the ground. They could still see Elmo's arm, waving and waving. Ma blew her nose briskly.

Elmo, looking back, saw the known world disappearing, the groups of waving figures growing smaller. The Engine plunged joyously through dark green meadows, the last of the summer flowers brushing its sides. Freed from its predetermined path, it leapt forward like a horse, unrestrained by bit and rein. It skirted fields where corn, turned the deepest dusty gold of harvest, still stood. It shot across stubble fields in seconds. It screamed its dragon's cry of release, of triumph.

When home became the horizon, it paused for a moment and they looked back, then it surged ahead again, flashing ever onward to new adventures. Civilization had returned.

Nicola Caines is a completely new British writer who lives with her husband Max in the West Midlands.

fiction

Ian R MacLeod

Stephen Baxter

Molly Brown

David Langford

Ian McDonald

Keith Brooke

insight

<http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/iplus>

infinity plus

Nicholas Royle

Eric Brown

critique

Jonathan Wylie

SP & FANTASY



A Few Last Things

Paul J. McAuley

Let us begin with a couple of endings. Tricky things, endings; knowing when to stop is as important as knowing where to begin. Especially in genre fiction, where popular opinion too often combines with unabashed commercialism with diminishing returns, for even fans grow tired of increasingly blurred xeroxes of their favourite tales, and of good ideas trampled threadbare by a herd of sequels.

For this reason, it was with a sense of caution that I welcomed *The Fall of Endymion*, the first volume of the sequel to Dan Simmons's *Hyperion Cantos*, one of the most densely imagined, fully realized and wildly ambitious space operas in the history of sf. For while *The Fall of Endymion* skillfully reopened its predecessor, it did so with an episodic narrative in which its heroes braved an infinitely extensible series of dangers without actually getting anywhere. And now, with *The Rise of Endymion* (Bantam, \$23.95), we must ask whether this venture succeeds in not merely replicating the original's verve and audacity, but in capping it. And whether this time it really does feel like The End.

Well, in short, mostly, and yes.

In *The Fall of Endymion*, Aenea, daughter of a Hyperion pilgrim and an avatar of the dead poet John Keats, was sent off towards her mentor on Old Earth, accompanied by her bodyguard Raul Endymion. Aenea may be the messiah who can unite humanity and overthrow the tyranny of an alliance between a faction of the TechnoCore, a loose association of artificial intelligences, and a revamped Catholic Church, which dominates human civilization by possession of a new form of faster-than-light travel and immortality through the use of cruciform symbionts which can regenerate bodies

and minds of their hosts. And so Aenea and Raul were pursued by agents of the AIs and the Church, but at last reached their goal.

Now, after several years as a student of an AI avatar of Frank Lloyd Wright, Aenea sets out again, this time to preach her message and confront her enemies. Is she a true messiah? Can the Church destroy her? What are the "Lions and Tigers and Bears" that the TechnoCore fears? What is the true nature of the Shrike? And what are the TechnoCore's plans for humanity?

These questions and more are fully answered in a long book that recasts all that has gone before, although some of the answers are less convincing than others. The revelation that the Church's FTL drive destroys human souls echoes the plot device of Bob Shaw's *The Palace of Eternity*, and Aenea's creed, that love is the unifying force of the Universe, is annoyingly vague. Nevertheless, there are marvels of crisply realized world-building and magnificently epic set pieces (Simmons is not content with one space battle, but furnishes his narrative with a whole series that ends with the destruction of a forest which englobes a sun), and a muscular, fast-paced plot. Her philosophy aside, Aenea makes a convincing messiah whose apotheosis is both moving and truly heart-rendingly terrible, and Raul Endymion is a satisfying action hero who understands just enough and no more of the intrigues in which he is involved.

Even though rather too much of the narrative is taken up with recapitulation of previous events, *The Rise of Endymion* cannot stand by itself. To understand, much less enjoy, it you will need to have read the preceding three volumes. But

aside from the longeurs of recapitulation, it is an equal of the first two books and provides an ending which satisfies and moves, with an outrageous plot twist and a heartfelt homage (in a book full of homages) to the greatest American novel of all. And it is done. And it is good.

Tim Powers's *Earthquake Weather* (Legend, £17.99; Tor, \$24.95) is an unexpected but welcome gift. Set in Southern California in the early 1990s, it draws together characters from his previous novels, *Last Call* and *Expiration Date*, in a complex plot which, although structured as a detective story, is not so much a who-dunnit as a how-to-do-it.

Scott Crane, who in *Last Call* won the post of Fisher King for the Western part of the USA in a bizarre card game, has been killed by one of the men who lost to him, a suicide who haunts his daughter Janis Plumtree, a sufferer of multiple personality syndrome ("Miss Chock-Full-'O'-Nuts," as someone calls her early on). Crane has maintained the health of the country and its people, and although his body does not decay, California is afflicted with bad weather, earthquakes and other manifestations of spiritual malaise.

Kootie Sullivan, a 14-year-old boy who was the receptacle of Thomas Edison's ghost in *Expiration Date*, may be the new Fisher King, but is reluctant to assume the responsibility. Sid Cochran, a newly widowed wine maker, becomes involved with Janis Plumtree and Kootie's adopted family when a mad psychiatrist and a mysterious cabal begin to chase both Crane's body and Kootie. Cochran and the others must find a way of resurrecting Crane or transferring his powers before it is too late.

With deceptive ease, Powers runs a series of complex ideas through a helter-skelter plot that recalls the best of the Hollywood noir movies. What drives the narrative is not so much the stock chase-'n'-peril plot, but the wonderfully observed characters, and particularly the interaction between Plumtree's various personalities and Sid Cochran (who like all Powers's heroes suffers both physical and psychic wounds).

With its black comedy, its driven but wholly believable cast of eccentrics, and its erudite disquisitions about ghost-eating, wine-making, the myth of Bacchus, the secret history of California from the Gold Rush to Kesey's Pranksters, and much else, *Earthquake Weather* is a fine synthesis of the concerns of two different novels into something wholly new and fresh. Once again, Powers proves that he is not only one of the best of contemporary fantasy writers, but also one of the most original.

GREG BEAR

SLANT



Greg Bear's "*P*" – or *Slant* – (Legend, £16.99; Tor, \$24.95) is a loose sequel to *Queen of Angels*. It is a few years after the middle of the next century. A time of plenty, crammed with marvels, when environmental problems have been solved, probes have visited the worlds of nearby stars, and mental health is prized above all else. But the technological miracles which sustain civilization throw up unexpected problems.

The multi-stranded plot slowly knits about the motivations of the Aristos, a mysterious group behind the construction of a huge mausoleum, the Omphalus, in Green Idaho, a libertarian separatist enclave in the heart of the United States. The Aristos are a group of wealthy individuals who, as "high naturals" who have never experienced mind therapy, are at the top of a hierarchal society in which mental health is paramount. One approaches Martin Burke, the therapist whose radical techniques were central to the plot of *Queen of Angels*, but then commits suicide. Police Inspector Mary Choy, also from *Queen of Angels*, is called in to investigate. Meanwhile, a mental plague with symptoms resembling Tourette's syndrome is afflicting the population, an artificial intelligence, Jill, encounters a strange and impossibly powerful confrere, Roddy, and a group of guns-for-hire plan to loot the treasures stored in the Omphalus.

Bear tangles the multiple plot-lines in a masterful fashion, although the frequent switching of viewpoint

and a sustained refusal to explain anything except on the various protagonists' terms, requires careful attention. The complex gear-trains of the plot finally mesh in a terrifically paced depiction of a hi-tech assault on the Omphalus, which Burke, Choy and Nathan Rashid, Jill's mentor, have identified as the seat of the plague.

But the Omphalus is unfinished and empty; the Aristos, extropians who want to coldsleep into a future where immortality is available, are only sketchily portrayed and quickly dismissed. They have served only as a kind of stalking horse; the plot (and Bear's interest) is really focused on the nature of Roddy and the motivations of its creator. Bear's bravado carries us through this brazen disjunction in the plot, and the novel grips to the

end. *Slant* coruscates with enough new ideas to float a dozen lesser sf novels, repaying the attention it demands and deepening its predecessor's slice through a future as complex and rich as our present, yet authentically strange and utterly plausible. It is not, one hopes, the end of Bear's investigation of this particular future history.

Stephen Baxter's *Titan* (Voyager, £17.99) continues the theme begun with his previous novel. *Voyage* was an alternate history in which a Mars mission as envisaged by Von Braun reached the red planet in 1986. *Titan* is a near-future novel in which an isolated group within NASA plan a suicidal mission to follow up hints that life may exist on Saturn's largest moon, Titan. In both, Baxter urgently argues the case for manned space exploration while not stinting in critical examination of the technology and the vast bureaucracy necessary to sustain the enterprise.

The near future Baxter posits is unredeemably bleak. America is ruled by a repressive right-wing government. An expansionist Chinese government threatens to

precipitate a world war. Environmental catastrophes are commonplace. Britain is in quarantine because of BSE-like plagues. And NASA is thrown to the military. A group within NASA, led by ex-astronaut Paula Benaceraf, puts together a last scientific mission, to follow up claims by maverick JPL scientist Isaac Rosenberg that he has detected evidence for life on Titan. Much of the novel is taken up with just how they do it.

It is hard sf of the purest kind, its jargon-ridden technical discourses on closed-cycle biosystems, orbital mechanics and the difficulties of reviving mothballed Saturn Vs illuminated by moments of pure wonder. An astronaut's corpse following the ship from which it was committed to space burns like a meteorite in Earth's atmosphere as the ship repasses the home planet in a complex slingshot manoeuvre on its way to Saturn. A space shuttle grounded in Titan's mushy surface looms out the murk, the familiar wholly unsettling in an alien setting.

As in *Voyage*, Baxter excels in making complex technological problems transparent as he describes in convincing detail how Saturn could be reached with a one-way mission involving space shuttles, Apollo command modules and Saturn V rockets. And he is unforgiving in his depiction of the risks and ordeals of extended spaceflight. Space is incessantly hostile: "The universe was huge, empty, dead. It knew nothing of mankind and all its works."





By the time they reach Titan, the crew is whittled down to Benaceraf, Rosenberg and an astronaut gone insane. Things get worse. The privations of exploring Titan's freezing, slushy surface are as terrible as those of the early Arctic explorers, and are depicted like Titan's unearthly landscapes with pithy realism. As in *Voyage*, Baxter shows us that human will and human cleverness can overcome everything but the weakness of human bodies. There is (because of a plot twist I won't give away) no possibility of return. Life on Titan died out long ago. Everyone else dies too.

This pitiless scenario is redeemed in a final section set billions of years in the future. The sun becomes a red giant, warming Titan. Ammonia-based life evolves from the fossil remnants of the earlier epoch, and then, as Titan warms further, oxygen-based life evolves from the micro-organisms the astronauts carried to Titan. And intelligent ammonia-based aliens, now living in domed refugia, have revived Benaceraf and Rosenberg.

While it is a necessary corrective to the bleakness of all that which has gone before, and closes with a marvelous last sentence, this last section comes perilously close to undermining the stark realism of the rest of the book with unnecessary sentiment. One can accept that micro-organisms evolved into a oxygen-based biota, but not that the two astronauts could be revived with all their memories intact after two billion years (elsewhere, Baxter describes how the *Voyager* space probe is by this time reduced to shredded foil by erosion in interstellar space). It is too pat, and begs the question of why the other astronauts weren't revived, and why and how the aliens did it in the first place. The novel's authentically detailed exposition suddenly becomes vague and coy.

Baxter needs human witnesses to make sense of things, it seems. It is the basis for his powerful arguments for manned space exploration, but it leads to a less credible vision of the reborn Benaceraf and Rosenberg making like Adam and Eve. Nevertheless, *Titan* is a stimulating, rewarding and cleverly plotted novel, which by accumulation of a myriad authentic details shows us just what a chancy and amazing achievement space exploration is. Baxter is one of a group of rising stars, including Greg Egan and John Barnes, that has reinvigorated hard sf. One feels that he is testing the limits of his ambition, and has yet to find them.

Ian R. MacLeod is a British writer, far less well known here than he deserves to be, who brings a literary sensibility and character-driven plots to stories which at first sight seem to be only marginally sf or fantasy. Ten

of these, all published in American magazines, are collected in *Voyages by Starlight* (Arkham House, no price shown), the last in an excellent series of single-author collections edited by Jim Turner (Arkham is returning to its original Lovecraftian concerns; Turner will continue his series at Golden Gryphon Press).

The stories are centred on characters seeking escape; and in all of them, it is character rather than action which drives the narrative, and the resolutions are often unexpected but never disappointing. In "1/72nd Scale," for instance, a young boy is set the task of completing a horrendously complex aircraft model which his recently dead brother was about to attempt, and discovers a way of asserting himself while honouring his dead brother's memory. In "Grownups" two adolescents try to come to terms with their sexuality in

a world that is exactly the same as ours except for the mechanics of human reproduction. In "Tirkiluk" it slowly becomes apparent that a science officer in an isolated Arctic weather base exists only as an act of will on the part of an outcast Inuit woman, and that at some point a tale of ordinary hardship has widened into myth.

The mundane surfaces of these stories, which are written with scrupulous fidelity to pitch and revealing detail, conceal unsettling notes of strangeness that grow in the telling. It is the reversal of the usual genre formula, where strangeness is dissected and made explicable; in MacLeod's stories, the familiar becomes unsettlingly strange until nothing can be trusted. Like good fiction of any type, they demand – and repay – close reading.

Paul J. McAuley

Ice on the Mind

Ken Brown

Antarctica by Kim Stanley Robinson (*Voyager*, £16.99) is possibly set in the same future as the author's Mars trilogy, although nearer to our own time – about 2005 I guess, although it isn't obvious to me exactly when. The style and method are the same as those of the Mars books, and it may even have some of the same characters; if not the same, many of them are interchangeable with each other. Both works have jovial mad Russians with ground-breaking ideas, both have strong, athletic, self-sufficient women who run and climb mountains, both have an Asian earth-mother figure who lives in hiding.

The first of many point-of-view characters is a maintenance worker at the US Antarctic research station at McMurdo Sound, called, simply, X (there is a vaguely plausible explanation for this). He is hopelessly in love with Val, the athletic women figure. She is a tourist guide, taking a party "in the footsteps of Amundsen." Wade is a "political staffer" who runs a Washington office for a leftist US Senator who spends most of his time travelling the world. Ta Shu is a Chinese journalist, poet and *feng shui* expert who is broadcasting the whole thing live to an audience of millions.

All these people, and a dozen or others, fetch up in Antarctica

together. They travel round, they see the sights. Some very strange things happen (which shouldn't surprise anyone who has read the Mars trilogy), they get into danger, they have adventures, they get out again.

There are two things about this book that stand out for me. The first to strike me – round about page 39 – is that this is an extremely political book. The characters think, talk and act politically. They discuss the Antarctic Treaty, they invent new political structures for fun, they put the world to rights over a few beers.

Remarkably, for a book that is surely at least partly aimed a US mass market, it deals intelligently and sympathetically with socialism. I don't just mean it is mildly left-wing, or what the Americans call "liberal." I don't even mean that it is a Marxist myth like the Mars trilogy (apologies to all our readers who use the words "Marxist" and "myth" in a completely different sense to me) but it deals with the currently unfashionable idea that there is a working class and a ruling class, and the future of the world lies with the working class. A couple of chapters in – on page 39 on my copy – X realizes that he is working-class. One of the "people working for hourly wages, on seasonal contracts – lifting loads, freezing their butts, losing finger-

nails ... running machinery ... all to keep the infrastructure and services going..."

It is always dangerous to speculate about the opinions or intentions of an author on the basis of his works, especially when there are so many characters and so many of them painted sympathetically. Despite his name, I think X is not the character with whom the author identifies most closely here. I suspect that to be Wade the staffer – many of his experiences in the book are those that the author has widely published as his own, in interviews and on the Net (which, incidentally, leads me to think that Robinson's main identification-character in the Mars trilogy must be Art, the corporate stringer from Earth who is in the equivalent position to Wade). So I wouldn't want to conclude that Robinson is a socialist, or that the book is definitely intended to encourage the reader to be a socialist. But, taken together with the pivotal section of *Blue Mars* (pages 118 and 119 of my copy), where Vlad pleads convincingly for a socialist constitution for Mars, it is hard not to think that he might be.

Antarctica in this novel is a world laboratory, but it is not only a place for studying rocks or the atmosphere or the seas. It is a human lab, a controlled experiment in the interaction between classes of human being. In the Antarctica of the Treaty there are workers and intellectuals and – at least in theory – nobody else. The military are there in their capacity as workers, not as enforcers for the ruling class or the state. There is, legally, no government in Antarctica other than the one you left at home far away, no bosses other than the ones you bring with you, no landowners, no borders other than Sites of Special Scientific Interest (and most of them are "policed" only by a common consent, or private charities based in New Zealand). In Robinson's Antarctic the Treaty is being bent, stretched and almost broken by oil companies, and the workers and intellectuals are chafing against their governments back home and producing new ways of organizing themselves.

The second thing that struck me about the

book is that I think it is intended to be *the* epic of Antarctica. The is the James A. Michener novel of the South Pole. If the meaty one-word title didn't give it away, the writing would. The whole human history of the continent is here.

Between the tourist guides and Shu the journalist, the reader is taken though all the stories of Antarctic exploration we read as children. (Is it possible to go through a British education without committing to memory the words: "I am just going outside. I may be some time"?)

The sailors, the explorers, the sealers and the whalers, the military men and the scientists are all here: Cook, Franklin, Ross, Borchgrevnik, Hillary, and the others. The story of Scott's disastrous failure and Amundsen's dog-eat-dog success is retold and argued over. If you read this book you learn the story of the Worst Journey in the World, when Wilson, Bowers and Cherry-Garrard took a side-trip from Scott's expedition to collect Emperor penguin eggs – which, of course, can only be found

in an Antarctic winter.

Most stirring of all, we have a full account of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition. The Irishman who didn't die with Scott, who thought that his wife would prefer a live dog to a dead lion, who lost his ship to grinding ice, who left his men scattered over the Southern Ocean from Cape Evans to Elephant Island and who got every single one of them back home. The rescue took almost two years, involved Norwegians, Chileans and New Zealanders, and included a 36-hour non-stop hike over South Georgia in winter, with a precipitous descent of an unexplored ice cliff in the dark. When he finally got to the Norwegian station he asked the manager, "When was the war over?" It was May, 1916.

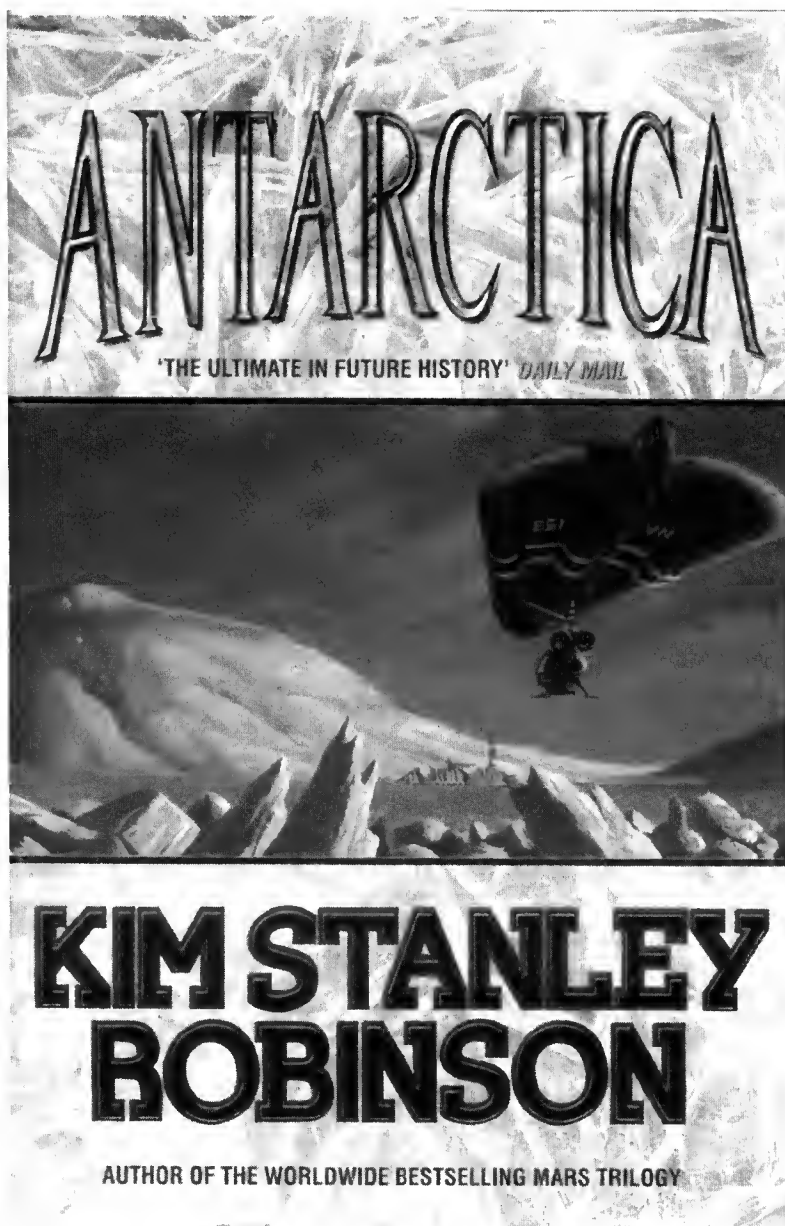
Meanwhile, back in the future, the characters and the readers are given a guided tour of Antarctica, stuffed with local colour, the jargon and anecdotes and attitudes of the US Antarctic stations. After reading the novel you will know that helicopters are always helos, pax are passengers,

freshies are vegetables, an oasis is dry rather than wet, the Kiwis drink more than the other Antarctic residents, a beaker is a scientist, the Southern Exposure is a bar, the real secret of US influence on the Ice is their ski-equipped Hercules transport planes. And you will know what the 300 Club is, and if you are like me you won't want to join it.

This isn't quite the same Antarctica that British people might be familiar with, but then McMurdo is as far away from the tip of the Peninsula where the British Antarctic Survey mostly hang out as London is from Syria or Nova Scotia.

This is the book to buy and read before your holiday in Antarctica. Or, as not all that many of us have the eight weeks and 5,000 quid needed for the full trip on a Russian ice-breaker, it is the one to buy and read anyway. After finishing it I had the Ice on my mind for a fortnight. It helped me get through a hot summer. It is great fun. And, whatever Scott might have thought, Shackleton was a hero.

Ken Brown



All good novels are of some significance, but not all significant novels are good; within the context of the lesbian novel, for instance, no one would suggest that *The Well of Loneliness* is as "good" as *The Friendly Young Ladies*, yet from the viewpoint of the literary historian Radclyffe Hall's is poorly written but a ground-breaker, while Mary Renault's is a minor work by a great writer. Moreover, within the context of any given writer's *oeuvre* the most significant books are not necessarily the most polished. Among the works of Conrad neither *Lord Jim* nor *Nostramo* represents a significant departure from either his previous work or the genre to which they belong – they are just superb examples; yet *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Agent* were recognized immediately as works of profound significance, because they presented a unique, unsettling and convincing view of the human soul – and never mind their structural oddities.

Narrowing the focus to generic sf, the eight substantial volumes which make up David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo* – now completed with the appearance of *The Marriage of the Living Dark* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99) – constitute a work of considerable significance, less for its extreme length (though the record-breaker can hardly be ignored) than because it presents a vision of the future significantly unlike any other. The extent to which it can be classed as a "good" book is more debatable.

For a start it's a panoramic novel, and a panorama cannot, by definition, possess the qualities of unity and balance which one expects of a landscape with figures composed according to the Golden Section. As the focus switches between characters it is inevitable that the reader's empathy will rise and decline for, regardless of how well they are drawn, everyone finds some sorts of character more accessible than others.

But Wingrove's major objective is to present not character but an entire society, showing how its politics, economics and cultural assumptions interact at every level. That would be daunting enough even for a society as comparatively simple and familiar as those of (say) Niven's *Known Space* or Anderson's *Technic Civilization*, but Wingrove has chosen to assume that post-Communist China, having absorbed every aspect of western technology, will combine it with a re-vitalized Confucianism to dominate the Solar System.

Since Confucianism is hierarchical in spirit and Sino-centric by definition, the resulting social order is profoundly racist. That aspect more than any other makes the book problematic in these sensitive times,

Wingrove's Chinoiserie

Chris Gilmore

because the racism is less like the violent and hysterical type of the 20th century than the ingrained, unquestioning and often (in its own terms, at any rate) "kindly" sort of the 19th.

Anglo/Sino racism always had a curious flavour, for of all the people whom they have dominated at various times, the British found most to admire in the Chinese. They found their plastic and graphic arts accessible and admirable; their cuisine was ingenious, their personal habits cleanly (which enhanced their physical beauty), and they were as industrious as they were cheerful. At the same time, the British were horrified by the Chinese penal code, disgusted by the formalized corruption pervading their public life and dismayed by what they perceived as the stultifying effects of the "oriental fatalism" which underlay their philosophy. Exploring their history, which revealed that in Tang and Sung times they had been the most technically advanced as well as the most culturally sophisticated people on the face of the Earth, the British sought a rationale which would allow them to go on admiring their many fine qualities while continuing to regard them as, by however tiny a degree, their inferiors. With their customary combination of ingenuity and hypocrisy, they found one. It went something like this.

"The Chinese [they might say] are a people of great talent, but they are

an homogenized people. Although their mean level of attainment is high, the dispersal about that mean is narrow. Thus, though a typical Chinese peasant is a man of culture and civility compared to our own underclass (or the French *Jacquerie*, or the German *Lumpenproletariat*), their men of genius do not compare with those of Europe. Their poetry is pretty enough, but they have produced no one to compare with Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe; their decorative arts are exquisite, but they have nothing to compare with the Parthenon, Chartres or Cologne; their mathematics is of a higher order, but they never produced a Newton, an Euler or a Pascal; above all, the *Analects* of Confucius cannot stand beside the *Dialogues* of Plato!"

Such thinking, which consists in essence of subjective feelings masquerading as objective assessments, is not the preserve of any one race. Wingrove has produced a world in which the dominant Chinese (now called Han) feel much the same way about *Hung Mao* (Caucasian types), the only other race which they have permitted to survive. Many such occupy positions of wealth and privilege, just as there were wealthy Chinese to be found throughout the British Empire, and where they are locally dominant many of them ill-treat the Han in the traditional fashion of those who never forget and never learn; but all real power rests with the seven Tangs, autocrats of the ruling Han families, who dominate a continent apiece. Meanwhile the physical structure of society reflects, in true Spenglerian fashion, the hierarchical Han social paradigms. It's a modular world, divided sharply between agricultural and residential areas, the latter 300 levels high and moored from pillars. The top 290 contain all that is desirable in Han eyes – industry, security, the rule of law; the higher up you live, the better things are. The bottom ten are the domain of vice, spice, force and the Triads; beneath the lowest deck, in the Stygian darkness of the Clay, the ultimate outcasts, when not hacking at each other for their own carrion, pick over the thrice-sifted garbage from Above.

Given provision for social/physical mobility in both directions such a social order might well remain stable for millennia, but the conditions reflect Wingrove's particular tragic vision. It is essentially a classical vision: people of forceful character and unimpeachable motives find themselves locked into ineluctable conflict as they seek to realize incompatible dreams. Under the pressure exerted by each other and their own fears they all progressively betray themselves, their friends and ultimately the visions which impel them.

Han society had become expansionist in response to a combination of power vacuum and external threat but remains essentially inward-looking. Now dominating the Solar System, it experiences no outward urge and is mistrustful of the *Hung Mao*-led Dispersionist faction which has taken for its symbol a feasible multi-generation starship. Yet among its citizens at all levels, the reproductive urge remains strong; the population is over 34 billion as the book opens, and nudging 40 a decade later. The general refusal to acknowledge that this entails a problem, let alone make plans to resolve it, has brought about a cultural neurosis on a grand scale: life is cheap as never before.

It's among Wingrove's strengths that he allows this sense of the cheapness of life to dominate the world-views of all his major characters, sympathetic and otherwise, including the three adolescent geniuses whose very different upbringing and destinies reflect contrasting aspects of their society. Li Yuan is destined to become T'ang of Europe; Kim Ward is the unacknowledged bastard of a disgraced traitor, conceived during a slumming-bout in the Clay; Ben Shepherd is the culmination of a high-risk, high-return eugenic experiment. They grow towards maturity, aware of but unable to counter the overt and covert pressures placed upon them – somewhat as if the boyhood of Frank Herbert's Paul Atreides were presented in three alternative modes, though Kim is by far the most engaging, as well as representing a rare triumph.

Very few writers have convincingly represented a character who is very much more intelligent than themselves, but Wingrove manages in this instance. The other two, with their hothouse precocity combined with profound emotional instability, are less sympathetic and a lot less convincing; in particular Li Yuan, whose combined priggishness and self-indulgence lead him into an endless series of wrong decisions, is extremely difficult to take seriously.

To an extent the extremism of Wingrove's characters is an aspect of his realism. The Han educational philosophy is geared to the production of what we westerners would regard as unbal-

anced individuals. Under the western tradition secondary education aims to produce generalists, who by their late teens are aware of the options open to them, and will go on to specialize as their talents indicate and their whims direct. Such is not the way of Chung Kuo, where a man's metier is likely to be determined at birth, and his education and training will thereafter be directed to its fulfilment, not his own. So it was in Byzantium, and in medieval Europe, and it's a matter of observation that few have ever rebelled against such limitations to their freedom. To a great extent this book is the story of such transcendent rebels, and though Wingrove is aware of their eccentricity in terms of their native culture, there are times when their rebellion seems overly self-conscious.

But they are better than his heavies, who constitute Wingrove's greatest single weakness as a writer. Howard DeVore, cynical leader of the Dispersionists, Stefan Lehmann, psychopathic nihilist, Hans Ebert, corrupt heir to a mighty industrial empire,

and the megalomaniac Wang Sau-leyan, who murders his way to the throne of Africa, are all gratuitously and monolithically nasty, especially in their sex-lives. The effect is not only distasteful, as one is dragged away from the plot into yet another bout of supererogatory algolagnia, but unconvincing – one feels that Wingrove is spreading black propaganda against his own creations, especially in the case of DeVore. A born manipulator with a passion for *wei chi* (Go), DeVore seems to be on the wrong side from the outset; one would expect to find such a man among the control freaks of the establishment rather than the self-indulgent, romantic Dispersionists, though in a sense it hardly matters; the interlocking plot dynamics of *Chung Kuo* generate a multi-level intrigue of huge complexity, wherein far more named characters die by the treachery of alleged friends or accomplices than by the overt violence of their enemies.

I suspect Wingrove knows this, for in the latter books he transmogrifies DeVore from a man into a something more like a Manichaean demiurge: a

spirit of unrest inevitably matched against a rival (and equally immortal) spirit of harmony, associated both with the artificial intelligence which spontaneously manifests itself through Chung Kuo's web of interconnected computers and with a preternaturally old *wei chi* champion. The effect is discordant since all other aspects of the book respect the conventions of hard sf, and although Wingrove drags them back from out-and-out fantasy, *Chung Kuo* would have been better had it restricted itself to the purely human, and to its characteristic world of levels. By the last two volumes, when that has been torn down, Chung Kuo has become to resemble a more conventional future Earth. Another generation of children is growing up too fast, and under inhuman stress, but as discipline has been lost the effect is repetitious.

Wingrove would have done better to construct his tale so as to conclude his epic with the fall of the towers.

Subject to the metaphysical conflict, the sub-plots include *Bildungsromane*, love stories, secret-agent stories and political dramas – all stirring stuff, and all involving studies of powerful personalities



under extreme pressure. But Wingrove keeps so many balls in the air that, inevitably, the reader tends to lose track at times; a major character can drop out of sight for literally hundreds of pages at a time, for the realistic but inartistic reason that nothing very dramatic is currently taking place in his/her life, and the focus is elsewhere. Later on some promising new characters are introduced into the panorama, but develop to less than full potential – the book is big, but has to end somewhere. I can live with that, but it implies that the novel needs to be read in heavy bursts over a short period; few readers other than the retired, the unemployed or those in jail will have the leisure.

It should certainly not be read as it was published: four hundred-and-something pages at a time, at intervals of a year or so over eight to nine years. That, of course, reflects the manner in which it was written, the jerkiness of the reading reflecting the jerkiness of the editorial rather than the creative process, as each volume was immobilized in print. Ideally no novel should be produced thus, but in this case the publishers had no real option. What is the net present value of a highly specialized, eight-volume, first novel, eight years hence? It's fashionable to deplore the influence of suits in publishing, but that is the sort of question that suits are fully justified in asking, and the answer has got to be very dusty. It could have been published in no other way.

Less excusably, there are places where the writing is hurried, and the visualization suffers. The minor character Chi Hsing is sometimes described as T'ang of the Australias, sometimes as T'ang of South America. It doesn't matter which, but someone should have decided. Likewise, Wingrove has difficulties with the verb to lie which should have been edited long before the printed version. Likewise, I haven't a word of Finnish, but I refuse to believe that *The Kalevala* (from which he quotes frequently in Kirby's translation) really consists of a loose pile of lines rejected as too vapid for *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Most seriously of all, Wingrove often uses ad hoc and unconvincing means to advance the plot: two women from the highest tier of a society with supremely sophisticated medical technology die in childbirth, their attendants powerless to save them; Kim Ward, though recognized as (at the very least) a property of staggering potential, is twice placed in a situation where he is in danger of murder by a homicidal schoolfellow; Marshall Tolonen, a soldier of mature years and great seniority, loses his rag and personally murders a suspect

in the presence of several hundred witnesses; Hal Shepherd, allegedly a man of profound psychological insight, brings up his children in circumstances guaranteed to engender incest; Li Yuan, a widower with only one acknowledged child and a dynasty to secure, imposes a *mariage blanc* on a plain, ageing woman of good family while continuing to cavort unfruitfully with his teenage maids; seriously rich businessmen take serious physical risks to do business in the Clay where there is obviously nothing worth buying; and so forth. The impression is that Wingrove, not trusting the dynamics of the very strong situations he has created, helps them along, the consequent loss of credibility being compounded by the fact that his characters are well visualized and differentiated – too good to be falsified by such slovenly expedients.

These are very far from being minor blemishes, yet ... I volunteered for this job. I had read the first six volumes piecemeal; now that the last two are available I felt the need to read the whole thing straight through, for only thus could I appreciate its great sweep and share the author's vision. The reason is simple: I'm an sf buff, and this, for all its faults of execution, is a most generous helping of what sf ought to be – a serious consideration of how the future may develop, based on rational extrapolations of the physical sciences as they interact with the writer's personal vision of the human spirit. *Chung Kuo* was of a piece with itself; the panorama a huge panorama, but with all its major elements introduced in the first two books, and the subsequent grace notes (such as the survival of extraterrestrial Nigerian and Japanese enclaves) legitimate embellishments, not hastily introduced *di ex machinis*.

I'm all the more sorry to report, therefore, that the final two books, set partly on post-débâcle Earth and partly in space, show a sad loss of direction, characterized by *di ex machinis* on a reckless scale. The reason is obvious: the world of levels was an inspiring vision, and provided its own dynamics; without it, Wingrove had perforce to fall back on his own plotting, whose weaknesses I have already noted.

They detract from his achievement, but *Chung Kuo* remains a significant achievement, even so. I can name a score of sf and fantasy writers, living and dead, who handle the language with more finesse than Wingrove, but almost all of them do so in what is by contrast a narrow or a trivial spirit. Restricting myself to a selection from the more intellectually interesting dead, Clifford Simak considered the interaction of the sempiternal spiritual truths with the ineluctable perception of the mechan-

ical nature of the universe; Philip K. Dick was tormented by the fear that every additional datum which the universe supplied would contribute to the horrific certainty that it was all a sham erected by a deranged god; Olaf Stapledon strove to confront that god, and to unify it with the least of its creatures; Roger Zelazny attempted to subsume both the universe and its creatures into the myths of its inhabitants; Alfred Bester and Robert Heinlein portrayed, in superficially dissimilar fashions, the triumph of consumer capitalism on hugely extended stages and, in fundamentally dissimilar fashions, portrayed its ultimate fusion with a mystical perception of human destiny. Yet all of these, plus a huge number of the living, wrote in terms of the explicit assumptions of their own cultural values; none attempted to envisage a future in which another philosophical strand has come to dominate except in the crude terms popular during the Cold War – triumphant communism or theocracy brought down by a movement for heroically resurgent individualism.

That is what Wingrove has done, and elements of *everything* listed in the paragraph above are present in his book. While I wish that he was both a better and a more careful writer, and that he had the confidence to let his excellent characterization work for itself instead of forcing the hands of his creatures, I write to celebrate, not to belittle his achievement; this book deserves not only the many PhDs that it will spawn, but the attentive reading of the few (for there will never be many) who have the time and the will to appreciate it. So go on, Gentle Reader! Surely there's some ideological crime worth serving a month in jail for! Proudly carry these eight heavy volumes through the prison gates.

Note: All eight are in print and, except for the most recent, readily available in A-format paperback from New English Library. Though hardback copies of the earlier books are more problematic there should be no real difficulty obtaining them: a trawl through the specialist sf dealers, the second-hand bookshops and charity shops will probably be rewarding. The eight books of *Chung Kuo* are, in order of publication:

The Middle Kingdom (1989)
The Broken Wheel (1990)
The White Mountain (1991)
The Stone Within (1992)
Beneath the Tree of Heaven (1993)
White Moon, Red Dragon (1994)
Days of Bitter Strength (1995)
The Marriage of the Living Dark (1997)

Chris Gilmore

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Applegate, K. A. **The Message.** "Animorphs, 4." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19355-4, 151pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 18th July 1997.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Fairy Tales.** Illustrated by David Wyatt, Clive Sandall and others. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-508-6, xii+628pp, B-format paperback, cover by Frederick Goodall, £6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; this is just one of a large number of anthologies the energetic Mike Ashley has coming from Robinson Publishing this season – he seems to grow ever more prolific; it contains classic fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen, Madame d'Aulnoy, the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Ludwig Tieck and many others, together with reprints of more recent works by Joan Aiken, Tanith Lee, Nancy Springer, Jane Yolen, etc., and a few original stories by Louise Cooper, F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre, Jessica Amanda Salmonson and Lawrence Schimel; Ashley has gone out of his way to include much unfamiliar material [including some surprising names: H. E. Bates, Charlotte Bronte, Alexandre Dumas, R. L. Stevenson...], so there are not many overlaps with such modern standard anthologies as Jack Zipes's *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture* [1991]; recommended.) 14th August 1997.

Athkins, D. E. **The Bride.** Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-19069-5, 158pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 18th July 1997.

Barton, William, and Michael Capobianco. **Alpha Centauri.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-

97511-4, 438pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; Barton and Capobianco's third collaborative novel, it was preceded by *Iris* and *Fellow Traveler*, neither of which we saw; Barton has also written several sf novels solus.) July 1997.

Baxter, Stephen. **Timelike Infinity.** "A novel in the Xeelee sequence." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-647618-X, 253pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 68.) 18th August 1997.

Baxter, Stephen. **Voyage.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648037-3, viii+591pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 116.) 18th August 1997.

Blaylock, James P. **Winter Tides.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00444-X, 346pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; the latest by one of the more "lit'ry" authors on Ace Books' list – who seems to be turning more and more to dark fantasy, as opposed to the lighter, more absurdist sort he used to write; we missed Blaylock's previous novel, which was called *All the Bells on Earth*: to the best of our knowledge, his last to appear in Britain was *Night Relics* [HarperCollins, 1994].) 1st August 1997.

Bradley, Rebecca. **Lady in Gil.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60190-6, 288pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1996.) July (?) 1997.

Brin, David. **The River of Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-413-8, 295pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1986; eleven stories, including such pieces as "The Crystal Spheres" and "Thor Meets Captain America.") 7th August 1997.

Bryant, Ray. **The Satisfaction House.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-2049-7, 408pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Stannard, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer, it's billed

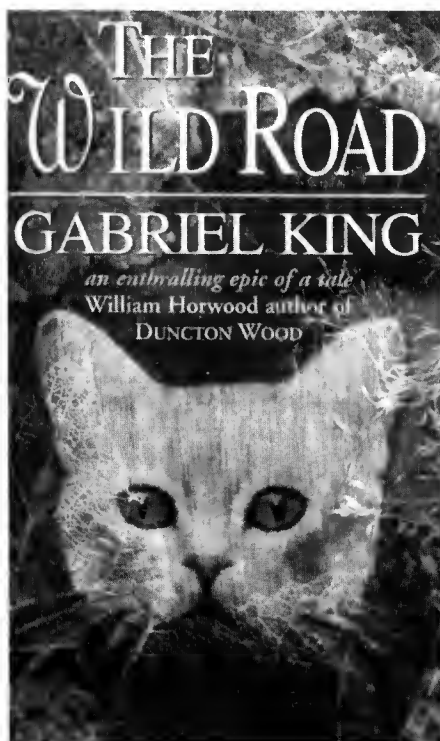
on the back cover as "the unanimous winner of the *You* magazine/Little, Brown 'Write a Blockbuster Novel Competition'") 14th August 1997.

Bunch, Chris. **The Seer King.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-489-8, 519pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1997; proof copy received; it's advertised as the first of a trilogy but we're not told the overall title.) 2nd October 1997.

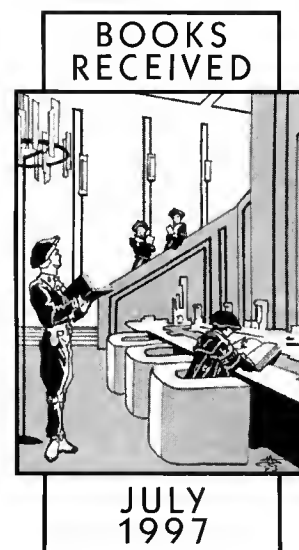
Chadbourn, Mark. **Scissor-man.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06480-3, 352pp, hardcover, cover by David Farren, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 6th November 1997.

Clayton, Jo. **Drum Calls.** "Book Two of *The Drums of Chaos*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86119-2, 349pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) October 1997.

Crichton, Michael. **The Lost World.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-963781-2, xiv+430pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the sequel to *Jurassic Park*; this is the movie tie-in reissue; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 103.) 3rd July 1997.



Deitz, Tom. **Landslayer's Law.** AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-78649-4, 293pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel,



first edition; latest in this Georgia-based author's Southern-flavoured series of light fantasies which began with *Windmaster's Bane* [1986].) July 1997.

Duncan, Dave. **Future Indefinite: Round Three of The Great Game.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-97586-6, xv+334pp, hardcover, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Past Imperative* and *Present Tense*, the latter of which we weren't sent.) August 1997.

Easton, Tom. **Periodic Stars: An Overview of Science Fiction Literature in the 1980s and '90s.** "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 24." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-1202-5, 264pp, trade paperback, \$27. (Collection of reviews of sf and fantasy novels, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Tom Easton has been a regular reviewer for *Analog* magazine since 1979, and these selected, and slightly revised, reviews are all taken from there; he covers some 250 books, mainly American and a few of them moderately obscure on this side of the Atlantic [novels by R. M. Meluch, Daniel Keys Moran, W. T. Quick, John E. Stith, Kathy Tyers...], so I can see that this is going to be a useful work of reference [it's indexed by author and title]; Easton is a plain-spoken, "plain-man" reviewer – no John Clute or Algis Budrys, he – but he appears



to have reliable taste.) *No dote shown: received in July 1997.*

England, Barry. **Figures in a Landscape.** Vintage, ISBN 0-09-974931-9, 219pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Non-sf novel of "fabular" type, first published in 1968; Barry England achieved a lot of success with this two-men-and-a-helicopter thriller, including comparisons to William Golding and a film adaptation by Joseph Losey, but then wrote no more novels for almost three decades, concentrating instead on plays and TV work; now in his early 60s, he has returned to novel-writing with the futuristic *No Man's Land*, listed below, and this older book has been reissued to accompany it.) 21st August 1997.

England, Barry. **No Man's Land.** Cape, ISBN 0-224-04369-2, 282pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-sf novel, first edition; England's first new novel in 29 years, according to the blurb it's a tale of survival in a world where "something strange and inexplicable [has happened] known only as the Event... Millions have died... The few survivors have fled to the new Capital, while the Army cleanses the land of scavengers, vicious outlaws who live for rape and plunder"; coincidentally, the scenario would seem to resemble that of Ian Banks's new novel, *A Song of Stone* [see listing two months ago]; unlike the Banks, however, which has more solid-looking pages, you can tell that this is a playwright's novel, full of "skinny" Beckettian dialogue.) 21st August 1997.

Etheridge, Rutledge. **Agent of Chaos.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00464-4, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it's space-opera adventure stuff, with a female lead; we've never heard of this strangely-named author before, but he or, more likely, she has already written the novels *Legend of the Duelist* [1993], *The First Duelist* [1994] and *Agent of Destruction* [1996?]; the present item is presumably a sequel to the last-named; the title *Agent of Chaos* has been used previously by Norman Spinrad for a 1967 sf novel.) 1st August 1997.

Fullilove, Eric James. **The Stranger.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-57576-7, 249pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; we haven't heard of this writer before, but apparently this is his second novel, following *Circle of One*.) 13th October 1997.

Gardner, James Alan. **Expendable.** AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-79439-X, 337pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gregory Bridges, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new Canadian writer.) July 1997.

Garfinkle, Richard. **Celestial Matters.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86348-9, 348pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; a debut book by a new American writer, it's "ancient hard SF" set in "an alternate-history Ptolemaic universe"; reviewed by Stephen Baxter in *Interzone* 106.) 14th July 1997.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Neutronium Alchemist: Book Two of the Night's Dawn Trilogy.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-66935-5, 996pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; yes, it's even longer than volume one, *The Reality Dysfunction*; when complete, this certainly will add up to the biggest space opera ever published.) 10th October 1997.

Hand, Elizabeth. **Glimmering.** "A Novel of the Coming Millennium." HarperPrism, ISBN 0-06-100805-2, xiv+413pp, hardcover, \$22. (Sf novel, first edition; an ambitious new work by the author of the highly-praised fantasy novel *Waking the Moon*, it opens in 1997 but soon moves through the turn of the Millennium.) *Lote entry: Morch publication not actually received for review, but acquired by us in July 1997.*

Harris, Deborah Turner. **The City of Exile.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00463-6, 365pp, A-format paperback, cover by Daniel Horne, \$6.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; third in the "Caledon Saga," following *Caledon of the Mists* and *The Queen of Ashes*, neither of which we saw; it's a work of Americanized Scotticism, featuring characters with names like Jamie, Duncan and Ewart, who converse "dourly" in the highland mists...) 1st August 1997.

Hoh, Diane. **The Whisperer.** "Nightmare Hall." Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-19070-9, 196pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 18th July 1997.

James, Peter. **The Truth.** Orion, ISBN 0-75281-019-7, 422pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; this represents a change of publisher for James: his first seven horror novels were all published in the UK by Gollancz; crime writers Robert Goddard and Minette Walters commend it on the cover.) 15th September 1997.

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Dark Terrors 3: The Gollancz Book of Horror.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06516-8, 381pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £16.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains new stories by Poppy Z. Brite, Pat Cadigan, Storm Constantine, Dennis Etchison, Christopher Fowler, Neil Gaiman, Ray Garton, Brian Hodge, Julian Rathbone, Michael Marshall Smith, Melanie Tem, Mark Timlin and others, plus reprints of recent stories by Ray Bradbury and Ramsey Campbell.) 30th October 1997.

Kerr, Katharine. **The Red Wyvern: Book One of the Dragon Mage.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37290-4, 340pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new "Deverry" novel.) 10th November 1997.

Kessel, John. **The Pure Product.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86117-6, 381pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; 16 stories, mainly reprinted from *Asimov's*, *F&SF* and *Omni*; one, "Gulliver at Home," is original to the book; there are also a couple of poems and a short play.) December 1997.

King, Gabriel. **The Wild Road.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-924252-4, 463pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first edition; this appears to be a debut novel by a new British writer, but it turns out that "Gabriel King" is a joint pseudonym for Jane

Johnson [sf/fantasy editor at HarperCollins] and M. John Harrison [eminent novelist] – "both cat lovers, they used to live together," states an accompanying publicity letter, and "since their 'divorce' they began this project"; a sequel, *The Golden Cat*, is promised for 1998.) November 1997.

Lawhead, Stephen R. **Grail: Book Five in the Pendragon Cycle.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-97526-2, viii+452pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Peterson, \$24. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; this is the last volume in the series by this British-based American author: it began some years ago with *Toliesin*, *Merlin*, *Arthur* and *Pendragon*, all first issued by Christian publishing houses in the USA and UK.) 11th June 1997.

Le Guin, Ursula K. **Unlocking the Air and Other Stories.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-06-017260-6, 207pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Klee, \$22. (Non-sf collection, first edition; 18 beautiful stories, many of them fantasies, reprinted from 1980s and 1990s issues of *Horper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Omni*, *Poyboy* and other magazines; it's an American HarperCollins book, and we haven't heard of any British edition, alas; recommended.) *Lote entry: 1996 publication not actually received for review, but bought in a Brighton second-hand bookshop.*

Lethem, Jonathan. **The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86353-5, 294pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1996; seven longish stories, three of them reprinted from *Asimov's*; this is Lethem's debut collection, after several highly-praised novels; it appeared in Tor hardcover last year, but we didn't see it then.) 15th August 1997.

Lindskold, Jane. **When the Gods are Silent.** AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-78848-9, 265pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gary Ruddell, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; Lindskold is also the co-author of *Donnerjock* [see below, under Roger Zelazny]; this appears to be her fifth solo novel: we saw none of the earlier ones.) *Lote entry: June publication, received in July 1997.*

McKenzie, Nancy. **The Child Queen: The Tale of Guine-**

vere and King Arthur. Legend, ISBN 0-09-922482-8, 307pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; first UK edition of this opening volume in a trilogy which seems to have found some success in America.) 3rd July 1997.

Middleton, Haydn. **The Queen's Captive: A Mordred Cycle Novel.**

Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1661-9, 246pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Player, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in 1996; sequel to *The King's Evil*, it concerns Morgan le Fay, and it comes with commendations from Tom Holt, Michael Moorcock and Philip Pullman.) 7th August 1997.

Miller, Sasha. **Ladylord.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648304-6, 382pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Baker, £5.99. (Romantic fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 4th August 1997.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Chaos Balance.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86389-6, 446pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the seventh "Recluce" novel.) September 1997.

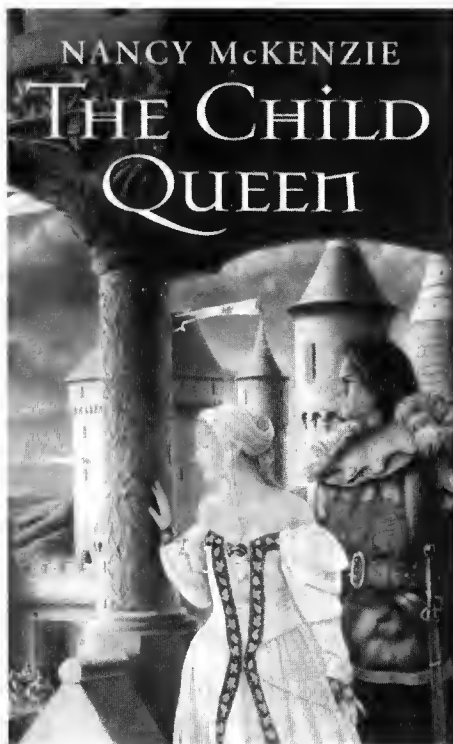
Niles, Douglas. **War of the Three Waters.** "Book Three of the Watershed Trilogy." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00442-3, 374pp, C-format paperback, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, \$14. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 1st August 1997.

O'Leary, Patrick. **The Gift.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86402-7, 286pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's second novel, following his science-fictional debut with the well-received *Door Number Three*.) October 1997.

Pagels, Elaine. **The Origin of Satan.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015368-3, xxiii+214pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Study of the development of the Judaeo-Christian concept of the Devil; first published in the USA, 1995; by an academically respectable author [Professor of Religion at Princeton University], this should be of great interest to *aficianadas* of

horror and occult fiction; recommended.) 31st July 1997.

Park, Severna. **Speaking Dreams.** AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-72924-5, 258pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new American writer who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, it appears to be on lesbian feminist themes.) Late entry: June publication, received in July 1997.



Powers, Tim. **The Anubis Gates.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-963421-X, 464pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campion, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1984; this famous book was previously available as a Grafton Books/ HarperCollins paperback, but now has been clawed back by Random House/Chatto & Windus/Legend, who did the first UK hardcover.) 3rd July 1997.

Pratchett, Terry. **Jingo.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06540-0, 285pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 21st "Discworld" novel, and probably the last to appear from Gollancz.) 6th November 1997.

Rice, Anne. **Servant of the Bones.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-918442-7, 405pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the dedication reads: "This book is dedicated to GOD.") 7th August 1997.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Antarctica.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225359-3, 412pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the master of California sf, author of the best trilogies anyone has written on the subjects of California and Mars [the red planet being a sort of natural extension of California, *vide* Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury and Philip K. Dick], here takes on wholly new territory – "the world's last unstripped asset," the great Antarctic continent itself – in his characteristic style of concerned, near-future, ecological sf.) 25th September 1997.

Robinson, Kim Stanley, ed. **Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86350-0, 352pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1994; reprint stories on ecological themes by Terry Bisson, Ernest Callenbach, Carol Emshwiller, Garry Kilworth, R. A. Lafferty, Ursula Le Guin, Pat Murphy, Paul Park, Robert Silverberg, Howard Waldrop, Gene Wolfe and others; one story, Rachel Pollack's "The Bead Woman," first appeared in an *Interzone*

anthology; it's interesting to note, in view of my remarks on "California sf" above, that this anthology, although not specifically Californian in its authorial line-up, is topped and tailed by short poems from two notable California poets, Gary Snyder and Robinson Jeffers; of course, ecology has always been a California theme, from long before it became fashionable elsewhere, and shows up in such pioneering works of California sf as Jack London's "The Scarlet Plague" [1912] and George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* [1949].) 15th July 1997.

Russell, Sharon A. **Stephen King: A Critical Companion.** "Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29417-8, xi+171pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Critical primer on the leading American horror writer; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by

Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) Late entry: 1996 publication, received in July 1997.

Saberhagen, Fred.

Berserker Fury. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85939-2, 383pp, hardcover, cover by Martin Andrews, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; Saberhagen's first new "Berserker" space opera in some time: the series began in the 1960s.) 13th August 1997.

Sarti, Ron. **Legacy of the Ancients: Book Two of the Chronicles of Scar.**

AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-73025-1, ix+366pp, A-format paperback, cover by Greg Call, \$5.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; it has a post-holocaust setting, and people like William Barton, Parke Godwin and Robert J. Sawyer commend it; the author [new to us] is a Vietnam veteran who lives in Dayton, Ohio.) Late entry: June publication, received in July 1997.

Shwartz, Susan. **Cross and Crescent.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85714-4, 382pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *Shards of Empire*, set in medieval Byzantium.) December 1997.

Simak, Clifford D. **The Civilisation Game and Other Stories.** Edited by Francis Lyall. Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-5169-1, 250pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf collection, first edition; it has been four years since the last Lyall-edited posthumous Simak collection [*The Creator and Other Stories*, 1993], so this new volume is most welcome as a part of the ongoing effort to keep a favourite old writer's name alive; all but one of the seven stories are previously uncollected; they are: "Horrible Example" (1961), "The Civilisation Game" (1958), "Hermit of Mars" (1939), "Masquerade" (1941), "Buckets of Diamonds" (1969), "Hunch" (1943) and "The Big Front Yard" (1958); the last story, although well-known [and a Hugo-winner in its day], has never been included in a UK-published Simak collection; so, for Simak completists, this volume is superior to the American small-press collection *Over the River and Through the Woods* which appeared a couple of years ago [that book, though strong in its



choices, consisted entirely of previously-collected stories – and also included “The Big Front Yard”). 24th July 1997.

Smith, Stephanie A. **Other Nature**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86352-7, 253pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; a first sf novel by an author who has previously written two fantasies, *Snow-Eyes* and *The Boy Who Was Thrown Away*; it comes with praise from people like Vonda McIntyre and Paul Park, who should know.) 15th July 1997.

Springer, Nancy. **Fair Peril**. AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-79430-6, 246pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mary Grandpré, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) July 1997.

Stephenson, Gregory. **Comic Inferno: The Satirical World of Robert Sheckley**. “The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today, Volume 66.” Borgo Press, ISBN 0-916732-61-4, 144pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Critical study of a once-lauded American sf writer; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; a study of Sheckley is welcome, and Stephenson writes clearly and engagingly [he is an American academic, resident in Denmark, who wrote a book on J. G. Ballard a few years ago – *Out of the Night and Into the Dream*, Greenwood Press, 1991]; however, he is a bit of a “yea-sayer,” and one would have liked to see more analysis of, or at least some comment on, the generally-perceived decline in the quality of Sheckley’s work over the past four decades: a star in his mid-20s, who graduated from *Galaxy* to *Poyboy* and then went on to international acclaim, Sheckley is now reduced to writing “Aliens” and “Star Trek” spinoffs [no mention of those here]; one would also have liked to see some comparisons and contrasts with other sf satirists, whether successful, like Kurt Vonnegut and Douglas Adams, or “failed,” like John Sladek [no mention of any of them here]; why are some satirical sf writers so wildly popular, while others, apparently no less talented, fall on hard times? – this study doesn’t ask such questions, but is nevertheless recommended in spite its limita-

tions.) *No date shown*: received in July 1997.

Stine, R. L. **Egg Monsters from Mars**. “Goosebumps, 42.” Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19372-4, 116pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 18th July 1997.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Peoples of Middle-earth**. “The History of Middle-earth, 12.” Edited by Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10348-2, xiii+482pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £9.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; the final volume in the series, this may be the last “new” Tolkien book we’ll see; like previous volumes, it consists of bits and pieces of various drafts, copiously annotated; in his valedictory foreword, Christopher Tolkien sounds rather weary.) 18th August 1997.

Turtledove, Harry. **The Guns of the South: A Novel of the Civil War**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41366-0, 518pp, B-format paperback, cover by Tom Stimpson, \$12. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; in America this would seem to be Turtledove’s most famous and highly-praised book, but it has never appeared in Britain, probably due to the fact that UK readers are not supposed to understand the ins and outs of American history – although Ward Moore’s *Bring the Jubilee* [1953], which has a similar South-wins-the-Civil War scenario, was long a favourite on this side of the Atlantic.) *Lote entry*: 15th May publication, received in July 1997.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: Striking the Balance**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68491-7, xi+514pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; last in the tetralogy begun with *Worldwar: In the Balance*, *Worldwar: Tilting the Balance* and *Worldwar: Upsetting the Balance*.) 21st August 1997.

Vance, Jack. **The Demon Princes, Volume Two: The Face, The Book of Dreams**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85827-2, 397pp, hardcover, \$29.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade

paperback edition [not seen]; the two novels it contains were first published in the USA in 1979 and 1981; presumably, Tor Books must have done a *Demon Princes, Volume One* [*The Stor King*, 1964, *The Killing Machine*, 1964, and *The Palace of Love*, 1967], but we didn’t receive it.) September 1997.

Vitola, Denise. **Opalite Moon**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00465-2, 294pp, A-format paperback, cover by Neal McPheeters, \$5.99. (Sf/horror/crime novel, first edition; it’s about a lycanthropic detective who operates in a near-future setting – which sounds like a fine old mixture of genres; this is a follow-up to an earlier title, *Quantum Moon*, by another Ace author we haven’t heard of before now.) 1st August 1997.

Wolfe, Gene. **The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86354-3, 383pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1980; a welcome reissue of

one of the classic collections; according to Ursula Le Guin, “some of the best American short stories of the decade are in this book” – the decade in question being the 1970s.) 13th August 1997.

Wood, N. Lee. **Looking for the Mahdi**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00450-4, 337pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the author’s debut book; the British edition was short-listed for this year’s Arthur C. Clarke Award [and is rumoured to have come close to winning].) 1st August 1997.

Zelazny, Roger, and Jane Lindskold. **Donnerjack**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-97326-X, 503pp, hardcover, cover by Amy Halperin, \$24. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; Zelazny’s last novel, completed by his partner of his final years, fantasy writer Lindskold; it’s a big book, 500 pages of smallish print, which makes it longer than any novel Zelazny published in his lifetime.) August 1997.

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and shorecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term “Spinoffery” is used for the sake of brevity.

Baxter, Stephen. **Gulliver-zone**. “The Web.” Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-423-5, vi+118pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £3.50. (Juvenile shared-world sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Baxter’s first kids’ book, it kicks off a series on virtual-reality themes which will be written by various hands; see also under Bowkett, below; Eric Brown, Peter F. Hamilton and Graham Joyce are among the other writers lined up to do a volume apiece.) 14th July 1997.

Blum, Jonathan, and Kate Orman. **Vampire Science**. “Doctor Who.” BBC Books, 0-563-40566-X, 283pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is one of the second pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC.) July 1997.

Bowkett Stephen. **Dreamcastle**. “The Web.” Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-424-3, vi+101pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £3.50. (Juvenile shared-world sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 14th July 1997.

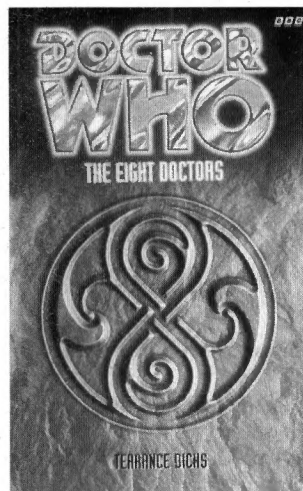
Bulis, Christopher. **The Ultimate Treasure**. “Doctor Who.” BBC Books, 0-563-40571-6, 281pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is one of the third pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC.) August 1997.

David, Peter. **The Two-Front War**. “Star Trek: New Frontier, Book Three.” Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01397-1, 152pp, A-format paperback, £2.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edi-

tion with a British price added.) *August 1997.*

David, Peter. **End Game.** "Star Trek: New Frontier, Book Four." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01398-X, 184pp, A-format paperback, £2.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; conclusion of a four-part serial novel; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *August 1997.*

DeSalle, Rob, and David Lindley. **The Science of Jurassic Park and The Lost World; or, How to Build a Dinosaur.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-255893-9, xxix+194pp, hardcover, cover by Shasti O'Leary, £12.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1997; about the possibilities of isolating prehistoric DNA, cloning dinosaurs, etc.) *24th July 1997.*



Dicks, Terrance. **The Eight Doctors.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40563-5, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is one of the first pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC since they clawed the rights to the character back from Virgin Publishing; they have announced a programme of two releases a month; whether they will be as successful as Virgin's "New Adventures" and "Missing Adventures" series remains to be seen; to judge purely from the feel of the first few volumes, they are not quite as attractively packaged: the typeface is not very friendly, the covers are somewhat drabber, and artists are not credited.) *Late entry: 5th June publication, received in July 1997.*

Leonard, Paul, and Jim Mortimore, eds. **Decalog 5: Wonders – Ten Stories, a Billion Years, an Infinite Universe.** Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20515-4, 313pp, A-format paperback, cover by Colin Howard, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf anthology, first edition; it contains original stories by Stephen Baxter, Dominic Green [his first story outside *Interzone*], Stephen Marley [twice], Mike O'Driscoll, Liz Sourbut, Ian Watson and others; a good line-up.) *18th September 1997.*

Lumley, Brian. **Titus Crow, Volume Two: The Clock of Dreams, Spawn of the Winds.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86347-0, 318pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$24.95. (Horror omnibus, first edition; these are some of the same tales as have been republished recently in Britain by HarperCollins in two paperback volumes as *Brian Lumley's Mythos Omnibus*; it seems they are appearing as three slimmer books in America [we never saw the first Tor volume]; they consist of pastiche Lovecraftiana, in the shared "Cthulhu Mythos" orchestrated after Lovecraft's death by August Derleth; the two novels in this volume first appeared separately in the USA in 1978.) *11th July 1997.*

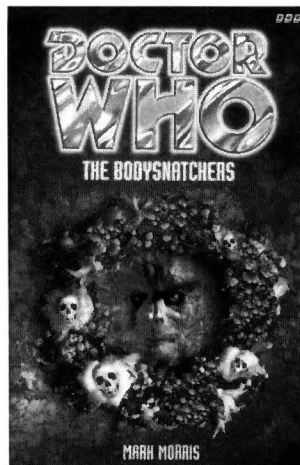
Lyons, Steve. **The Murder Game.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40565-1, 284pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is one of the second pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC.) *July 1997.*

Mariner, Carl K. **Beyond Limits.** "The Sex Files, File 1." Headline Delta, ISBN 0-7472-5718-3, 248pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Pornographic fantasy novel which presents itself as an unofficial tie-in to a certain well-known TV series, complete with the apocryphal cover slogan, "The naked truth is out there"; first edition; every chapter contains an explicit sex scene, usually of a highly unbelievable nature; the author is probably pseudonymous – we wonder if it's anyone we know...) *24th July 1997.*

Miles, Lawrence. **Down.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20512-X, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by

Mark Salwowski, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, featuring the spacefaring adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who's]; first edition.) *18th September 1997.*

Morris, Mark. **The Bodysnatchers.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40568-6, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is one of the third pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC, and the first "Who" title to be written by horror novelist Mark Morris; it opens in 1894 London.) *August 1997.*



Norton, Andre, and Sherwood Smith. **A Mind for Trade: A Great New Solar Queen Adventure.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85920-1, 256pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; although billed as a collaboration, this is probably a sharecrop [the two-line acknowledgment is signed by Smith alone]; it's a follow-up to *Derelict for Trade* [1997], which in turn was a sequel to Norton's juvenile novel *Sargasso of Space* [1955]; as by "Andrew North", etc.; "Sherwood Smith" is a pseudonym of Christine Lowentroun, who has also written under various other names.) *October 1997.*

Okrand, Marc. **Klingon for the Galactic Traveller.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00995-8, viii+264pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Illustrated handbook to an imaginary alien language, spun off from the sf TV series; first published in the USA, 1997; the author has degrees in linguistics

from the University of California; it's utter gobbledegook to us, but it's said there are more enthusiasts for this stuff worldwide than there are for Esperanto, which says something for the influence of a mere sf show; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *September 1997.*

Russell, Gary. **Business Unusual.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40575-9, 277pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is one of the fourth pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC; it seems to be set mainly in our hometown of Brighton, in the year 1989; the other volume to be released on the same date, *Genocide* by Paul Leonard, has not yet reached us.) *September 1997.*

Shay, Don, and Bill Norton. **Alien: The Special Effects.** "Based on the entire *Alien* trilogy from Twentieth Century Fox." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-695-0, 143pp, large-format paperback, £12.99. (Copiously illustrated book about the special effects in the "Aliens" sf movies; first edition [?]; the print is quite small, so the text is substantial.) *24th July 1997.*

Topping, Keith, and Martin Day. **The Devil Goblins from Neptune.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40564-3, 283pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is the other of the initial pair of new Doctor Who books to be published by the BBC; it seems they are going to be using many of the same writers as Virgin Publishing did, but unfortunately the brief information on the authors which we had grown accustomed to on the back covers of the Virgin titles is missing from these BBC products.) *Late entry: 5th June publication, received in July 1997.*

Warrington, Freda. **Dracula the Undead.** Penguin, no ISBN shown, x+300pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first edition; sequel by another hand to *Dracula* by Bram Stoker – timed to appear on that novel's hundredth anniversary; unbound proof copy received.) *30th October 1997.*



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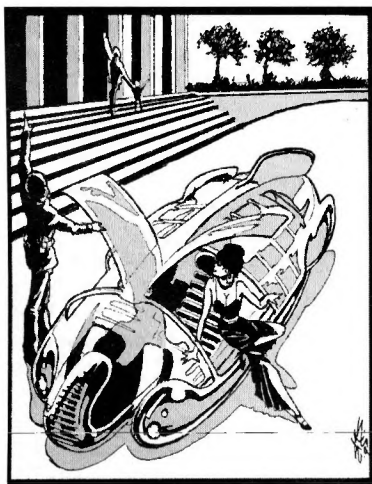
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HARM'S WAY – "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (Locus) – large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox* and *Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 98 Sturton St., Cambridge CB1 2QA (note new address).

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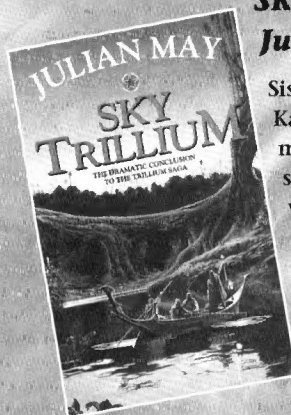
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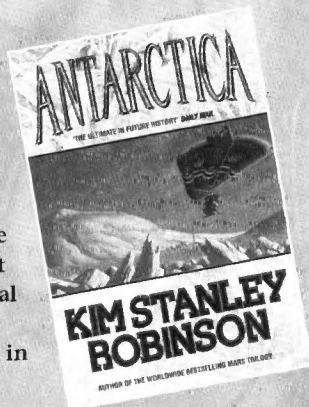
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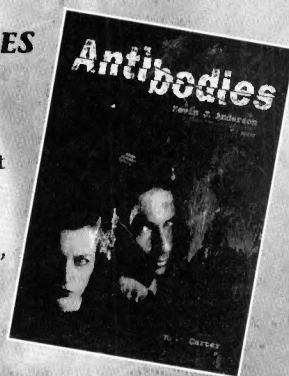


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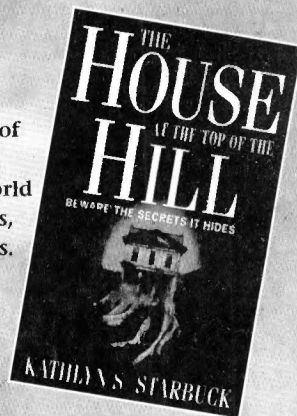


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